

take this compass, follow it home

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by [lightning_anon](#)

Summary

Tommy's a fuck up, he can't pay attention, and never sits still. He taps his hands, pushes people away, and has never had a best friend. He's a screwed up, forgotten kid lost in the foster system. He's also just been placed with a new family. Tommy knows how this goes, he never ends up staying long. After all, no one wants a fuck up like him.

Why would this house be any different?

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Or: the obligatory sbi foster au, but with a focus on the neurodivergent kids that inevitably get lost in the system.

a door opens

Chapter Summary

Here he goes again. Another foster home, another fuck up, another time being returned into the system. Tommy knows how the cycle goes, why should this time be any different?

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: discussion of topics of abuse/rape/bullying/neglect/triggers, ableism, self-worth issues, the general fucked-ness that comes w/ the foster system

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy hadn't asked for this. He hadn't asked, hadn't wanted, hadn't needed. But Tommy was a ward of the state and thus had practically no control over his life. Apparently people saw the word 'minor' on his papers and decided that his own thoughts and desires were minor inconveniences to be dismissed.

So here he was again, on run eight.

Eight times he's been through this already.

Look, he knows what people think of the foster system. About half of it is true.

He hasn't been raped, or touched. He was hit in two different houses and the minute someone said anything about the abuse faced, Tommy was immediately pulled out of the homes and the parents prosecuted.

That said, it isn't all sunshine and rainbows either.

He has been bullied and shoved around by older kids. He's seen foster parents prioritize biological children over him. He's had to share rooms with too many children, but never had to sleep on the floor. He's been denied meals before, generally for misbehavior, but never starved.

But the worst thing, the absolute worst thing about being a foster kid in the system is that four out of his seven previous families cared about him. They had genuinely wanted another kid, and had been excited to invite Tommy into their homes.

Ultimately, it never worked out. House 1 decided he got into too many fights at school. House 3 told him that he didn't mesh well into the "dynamic" of the family as well as being loud and disruptive. House 4 had tried to convert him to Christianity but after six months of saying God's name in vain, sent him back. House 6 said they were used to "difficult children" which in reality meant that they decided that they could stamp Tommy's adhd out of him.

That was the second house he had been hit in.

That had ended spectacularly.

But the families had cared, had wanted him.

Or wanted him for a bit, wanted an ideal him, wanted a child but not a child like Tommy.

They wanted a doll, a bright eyed, bushy tailed teen ready to please. Someone to be their baby boy and do the chores on time and get good grades in school. They wanted a son with manners, who played games with friends, someone who participated in family movie night.

Tommy was half way through a growth spurt that had him tripping over his own feet more often than not. He gave up on school years ago and enjoyed drawing doodles in the corners of his notebook. He liked to go for runs, alone, with no one to bother him. He never really had the attention span to sit through an entire movie and always forgot to do the chores he was supposed to.

In short, no one wanted a kid like Tommy.

So house 8 it was.

"Phil has two other kids," his social worker tells him, "Both were a part of the foster system as well. Techno's 16, Wilbur is 17. They're nice people."

Tommy huffs, staring out the window at rolling hills.

"Tommy, I know this can't be easy. I know you've bounced around, but Tommy you are a good kid. Okay? I really think you're going to like it at Phil's."

"I'm just going to get into trouble," Tommy says.

Amelia hesitates, and Tommy knows she's trying to figure out what to say, because he has a point. Tommy always does something to mess up and he gets in trouble and then he's sent back.

"Phil's different," she says, "he's dealt with these sorts of difficulties before."

Right. Difficult. A problem child. That's all Tommy's known to be. He scowls.

"That's not what I mean," Amelia tries, obviously realizing she's hit a sore spot. Tommy doesn't care, instead looking out as they turn into a nicely kept neighborhood.

He stays quiet, leg bouncing as they drive through streets and holds his breath when Amelia starts reading the numbers on the houses, looking for an exact one.

A minute later, she pulls to a stop at the curb.

“Ready?” his Amelia asks at his side.

Tommy gives her a scowl, before staring out the window at the looming building in front of him. It’s decent size, with a nice front yard and two stories tall. Nicer than house 7, not as nice as house 4.

“Tommy,” his social worker says, capturing his wandering attention. He fiddles with his fingers as he keeps his head down. “Tommy, you’re a good kid. Phil, Phil is really great, I’m not going to lie. I think this placement is going to be really good for you.”

“Until I fuck it up,” Tommy reminds. They’ve just had this conversation. They have it every time. Tommy’s been here seven times before, he knows how it goes.

Amelia sighs next to him.

“I’ll make you a deal,” she says, “at the two month check in, if you still think that, I’ll get you a game you want for your DS.”

“Any game?” he asks, immediately looking over.

“Age-appropriate,” she clarifies, “but yes.”

Amelia’s definition of age-appropriate is bound to be vastly different from his own... but still.

“Really?” Tommy asks, eyes brightening as he looks back over at the house.

“Really,” she promises.

“Two months, huh?” he muses. He breathes out, and unbuckles his seatbelt. In the window he can see the reflection of his social worker, noting her smile.

Together they get out of the car- Tommy grabbing his garbage bag of belongings- and walk over to the front door.

Amelia knocks on the door and Tommy tenses, steeling himself for the inevitable painful introduction.

The door opens almost immediately, revealing a freakishly tall teenager.

“Oh shit,” he says, “you’re Tommy.” He turns away almost immediately, racing further inside and up some stairs shouting the name “Phil!”

Tommy can only stare at the older teen’s retreating back. At least the first minute wasn’t as bad as house 5.

Something shuffles on the couch inside and suddenly another teen- one of reasonable height- rolls off the couch shaking out long pink hair that's pulled back in a loose ponytail.

"Hi," he says gruffly, approaching them at the door, "I'm Techno, that maniac's Wilbur, c'mon in."

"Thank you," Amelia says, giving Tommy a gentle shove forward. He takes his first stumbling steps into his new temporary placement.

"It's nice to meet you Techno," Amelia says when Tommy stays quiet, "Phil talked about you and Wilbur a lot."

Techno snorts.

"Sounds like him," he agrees, "he's all," Techno waves his hand as if to describe whatever Phil is as a weird gesture, "emotional," he finishes.

In the background, Wilbur returns back down the stairs, followed by a man who has to be Phil. When he sees Timmy, his face instantly brightens and Tommy looks down, staring at the floor.

"Hello," he greets, "Amelia, it's nice to meet you in person, and Tommy it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Hi," he mutters.

"Nice to meet you as well," Amelia says, "Now we have just a few things to go over and then I'll be out of your hair until the first check up."

Phil nods, before turning to the teenagers behind him.

"Techno, Wil, mind showing Tommy where his room is?"

"Sure, c'mon," Wilbur says, "We'll go to your room first, let you drop off your stuff."

Tommy watches them, and grips his garbage bag closer. Wilbur turns to exit the room, Techno following. Tommy has no choice but to go with them.

They lead him up the stairs Tommy has already seen Wilbur race up and down.

Upstairs is a simple L-shaped hallway, two doors on the left, one straight ahead on the far wall, and a fourth all the way at the end of the L.

"That's my room," Wilbur says, gesturing to the first door on the left. "Next door is the bathroom, and you're the door straight ahead."

Wilbur steps aside, allowing Tommy to take the lead, and he hesitantly does so.

"Then down that hall is Phil," Wilbur continues as Tommy twists the door open for his own room.

His own room.

He only had his own room in one other house. His stuff had gotten stolen the least in that house- one of the biggest perks of any foster home he's been in.

The room is nice. There's a bed, desk, dresser, and closet. It's really nice. More than Tommy has gotten from a lot of houses. He drops his garbage bag at the foot of the bed. It looks out of place in the neat room.

"Do you want to take some space and unpack now, or do you want to see the rest of the house first?" Techno asks him.

Tommy blinks, surprised that he's given the option. He shifts, wondering if his choice matters.

"Let's go for the tour, Big Man," he states boldly, putting on a façade of being comfortable.

It's better to know where everything is first, he reasons. If he needs anything, it'll be a lot easier to get it himself. He doesn't know if Phil withholds things as a punishment, but if he does Tommy knows he's screwed so he better figure out the layout first.

"Cool," Wilbur says, leading them all back out. He opens the door next to Tommy's, "Like I said, bathroom."

Tommy peers in, taking note of the tile, shower/bath combo, and sink. There's a toothbrush holder with one in it that Tommy assumes is Wilbur's.

"Any toiletries you need are under the sink. Toothbrush, deodorant, shampoo, whatever. If you want something specific, tell Phil."

Wilbur turns back out and continues forward, barely giving Tommy time to process any of the information before he's pushing the next door open.

"This is my room," Wilbur says, gesturing inside. It's colored mostly in blue's, brown's, and beige's. Tommy takes note of the guitar in one corner and the yellow jumper thrown over the back of Wilbur's desk chair.

"Don't go into rooms without permission," Techno adds.

There's the first catch. He files that away, noting that if needs anything, he'll have to make sure no one sees him.

"Right," Wilbur agrees, "If you're going into someone's room, you have to ask first. I don't mind too much, nor does Phil. But Techno likes if you ask, and Phil will always ask before coming into your room. Always."

"What if I say no," he counters, testing where the limit is. He's had foster parents that said they respected his privacy before. They'd knock on his door before immediately opening it and walking right in like they owned the place. And, they did own the place. It was another reminder that this was their home, not Tommy's. It would never be Tommy's home.

Wilbur shrugs, “Then he won’t come in. The only exception is that if he thinks you’re in danger, or a danger to someone else.”

Who do these people think he is?

“I’m not going to fucking hurt anyone,” he protests.

“Okay, good,” Wilbur says before moving on. “That’s all that’s upstairs besides Phil’s room. Techno’s and everything else is downstairs.”

Under Wilbur’s lead, they all file back downstairs. The movement catches the eye of Phil and Amelia who are sitting in the kitchen, looking over some papers.

“All good?” Phil calls.

“Yup,” Wilbur says as Techno nods. Phil smiles.

“How about you Tommy?”

Tommy startles, surprised to be called out.

“Uh, fine,” he offers.

Phil nods and turns back to the papers.

“Back door, storage closet, door to garage, living room, kitchen,” Wilbur points out in order before herding them down a hall, “Phil’ll go over all the house rules with you later.” Tommy urgently scans the rooms even as he’s herded further down the hall, trying to memorize everything he can.

“And here’s Techno’s room,” Wilbur says, gesturing at the newest door. Techno himself sneaks around, pushing open the door and stepping inside. Tommy studies the room, noting the contrast between Techno’s and Wilbur’s.

Techno’s room is mostly grey and green, spots of random colors in different places. His desk is a lot larger and papers are scattered all across it. Techno goes over to his bed stand table and picks something up. He puts the thing he’s holding around his neck, and Tommy realizes they’re headphones, before also picking up a colorful plastic noodle looking thing and returning to the others. He shuts the door behind him.

Tommy looks at the noodle thing, watching as Techno doesn’t seem to do anything with it but twist it in his hands. Weird.

“Another bathroom,” Wilbur acknowledges, letting Tommy peek through the door before moving swiftly on. “And here’s Phil’s office,” Wilbur says, pushing the door open and immediately entering. Techno enters as well, and Tommy hovers by the door, unsure if he’s allowed in.

“When Phil’s doing work from home, he’ll be in here usually,” Wilbur says, “he doesn’t mind us in here, he actually says he likes it when we chill in here when he’s working. If you’re too

distracting he might ask you to leave though.”

Too distracting. If Tommy hasn’t heard that about himself a billion times. Guess he won’t be going into the office then.

“And that’s pretty much it,” Wilbur confirms, slowly leading them back towards the living room. Phil and Amelia once again glance over from the kitchen, and this time they both stand up.

“All done with the tour?” Phil asks.

“Yup,” Techno agrees.

“That’s great,” Amelia cuts in, “Well we’re done here, Tommy, mind walking me to the car?”

“Sure,” he says, following her towards the door.

This is standard, a couple final minutes alone with Tommy to make sure everything’s okay.

“What do you think?” she asks.

Tommy shrugs. So far, it’s fine. The question is much more how long it’ll stay that way. How long until they get sick of him, until they get annoyed from his fidgeting and his loud voice and his tendency to interrupt and inability to focus on anything. But yeah, fine for now.

“You have my number, right?” she asks. Tommy nods.

“Okay. Then I’ll see you in a week for the first check in, alright?”

Tommy nods once more, and with a last goodbye, she’s gone. Tommy takes a minute to watch her car leave before he turns back to the house behind him. This is it, huh?

Tommy reenters to all three of the habitants standing around the living room.

“Hey Tommy,” Phil says, “We have a few things for you, and I’d like to go over the house rules with you a bit, but we can do that later or tomorrow if you would prefer.

Tommy hesitates, wondering if the choice is a trap. He’s frankly overwhelmed. The fast tour and the complete turn around of being in a new house getting to him. Not to mention the brand new people he has to get to know and interact with.

But if he says later while Phil thinks he doesn’t care? That he won’t follow the rules?

“Now’s fine,” he tries.

“Okay, Wil, Techno, can you go grab Tommy’s things?”

Tommy’s immediately defensive, all too used to his things being taken and touched without his permission. He realizes that this has to be another loophole. Wilbur said Phil wouldn’t go

into his room without his permission, but he said nothing about Phil having them do his bidding for him.

Even so, Tommy doesn't dare protest. Getting protective of the few things he owns will only most certainly get him in trouble. Plus, it's not like Tommy has much value anyways. The only thing he really cares about is his old crappy DS he's been able to hang onto all this time.

But Techno and Wilbur don't go back upstairs, instead sliding around to one of the doors Wilbur had pointed out earlier. Storage, Tommy thinks. As he watches them, Phil moves to sit at the kitchen table. When he realizes that, Tommy quickly follows, sitting as well, even though it puts Wilbur and Techno out of sight.

Wilbur and Techno soon return, dropping two bags and a small box on the table and taking seats themselves.

Techno takes the opportunity to shove his headphones over his ears from where they had been around his neck. He pulls out the noodle thing, and continues to twist it. Tommy wonders if it's a puzzle or something.

"Tommy?" Phil's voice calls.

"Hmm?" Tommy asks, jerking back his attention to Phil. When he realizes he once again zoned out, he blushes.

Phil doesn't seem to notice, instead passing over the small box.

Tommy picks it up, immediately knowing what it is. The picture of a phone on the box helps his prediction immensely.

But there's, there's no fucking way. A phone is a privilege. Tommy hasn't done anything to deserve one.

He opens the box, cautious. Maybe it's a mean prank.

Nope. There's a smartphone. Tommy stares at it in shock.

"Our numbers and Amelia's are all in it," Phil explains, "We got you a case as well, but you can pick out your own if you prefer."

"This is mine?" Tommy asks, barely getting the words out.

"Yup," Phil agrees.

Tommy narrows his eyes, and pulls the phone out, clenching it a bit too tight. It's all too good to be true. Not every family had the money to give each kid a phone, but the ones that did had always had intensely specific rules and rights that went along with having one.

"What's the catch?" he asks.

"No catch," Phil says, "Unless you're unsafe with the phone, it's yours."

Unsafe. What they don't want Tommy sticking it into a socket? All of this is way too good to be true. But for now, the other shoe had yet to drop.

"Thank you," he says instead. He learned to be polite in house 3. Better safe than sorry.

"You're welcome," Phil says.

Techno pushes a bag forward next. Tommy blinks at it, and looks over at Wilbur and Phil for confirmation. They both seem to be waiting, so Tommy cautiously grabs it and starts pulling things out.

The first thing is socks. Five pairs of them. How did- how did Phil know?

He can feel his toes peeking out of the worn down holes in his current socks in his shoes.

"Those are from me," Wilbur says, "It's... I mean you never have a lot in the system but at least you get new clothes when you grow out of 'em. But everyone forgets socks."

Tommy takes them in wonder, putting them gently to the side.

"Thanks," he mutters, still shocked.

He moves on, pulling out two notebooks, some pens, and pencils.

"School supplies, or for whatever," Phil says, "We can get whatever else you need later."

Tommy continues, pulling out a few more school related things before reaching a puzzle and coloring book.

He looks at them with a frown. Seriously, puzzles? A coloring book? He's a teenager! How old do they think he is?

"Also from me," Wilbur pipes up, "Sometimes everything gets a bit much, y'know? I find the repetition relaxing. If it's not your thing, that's fine."

"It's not," he offers bluntly.

He reaches into the bag again, pulling out a few final things.

There's a small box with a cube in it, a fidget spinner, and a noodle thing like Techno's.

He doesn't get any of it.

"From me," Techno inputs, "didn't know if you had any stim stuff."

"Stim?" Tommy asks, poking at the fidget spinner.

"Yeah, I have adhd too. And I'm autistic, so I get it."

Techno, Techno has adhd?

Shit is this going to be like house 6, isn't? Tommy knew all of this was too good to be true. Phil was nice now, but he'd get mean when he inevitably realized that there is no fixing Tommy. Trust him, he's tried. His brain is screwed up.

Tommy gulps, hands starting to tremble slightly. He still doesn't get what the gifts are, but now that he knows it has something to do with getting rid of his adhd, he instantly hates them.

The area around him is getting full, so he doesn't feel bad putting them back in the bag, and then slowly putting the rest of the things he's collected in it as well. He's bound to lose it all soon enough.

When he's done, the next bag gets pushed towards him. He zones out a bit as he empties it, but there's not a ton to see. It's a set of towels, hand towel, and washcloth including for him. They're red. Tommy doesn't mind the color terribly.

"Okay, now let's discuss house rules," Phil says, "Mind leaving me and Tommy for a bit, boys?"

Techno and Wilbur both nod and leave for somewhere else in the house.

Now that Tommy's started to figure out what type of house this is, he knows that the rules part is finally going to be where the other foot drops.

"We don't have a lot of rules," Phil says. "Basics are, you have free access to anything in the kitchen at any time. If I'm home, I'm more than willing to make you a meal or help you get something. If something runs out, or if there's something you want in particular, let me or one of the boys know. Make sense?"

Tommy carefully nods. At least they weren't going to put him on one of those weird pseudo-science brain diets to make him focus better or some shit.

"Awesome. Oh and I don't keep alcohol in the house, but if it was, that's off limits.

"Second rule is that your space will be respected. No one will enter your room without permission unless there is threat of harm to you or others. In turn, I expect the same from you. Got it?"

Tommy nods.

"Third, basic respect. I don't expect you to immediately get along with everyone here or love us all instantly. But we all deserve respect, and you do as well. Don't intentionally hurt someone else, and respect boundaries. Your boundaries will also be respected and if you ever feel hurt, scared, or disrespected please let me or the boys know so we can take care of it and discuss it."

Boundaries huh? What did that mean? Tommy looked off to the side, considering the question before his gaze quickly caught on a framed photo. It had two people in it, what

looked to be a younger Techno and Phil. Techno appeared to be even younger than Tommy. How long had Techno been living here?

“Tommy?”

At the sound of his name, Tommy snaps his attention back and away from the photo. Fuck, he needs to stop zoning out and focus. This is important. He needs to know the house rules so he doesn’t fuck up right away.

“Would it help if I wrote down the rules or if we took a break?” Phil asks, “It seems like you’re having trouble focusing.”

“No,” Tommy says quickly, “No it’s fine. I’ll pay attention.”

He’s not about to fuck up in his first hour here. Tommy doesn’t even think Phil’s allowed to return him that quickly.

“Tommy, it’s okay if you can’t-”

“What’s rule four?” he interjects. Phil sighs, but continues.

“Fourth, avoid triggers. Everyone in the house has them. Techno often doesn’t like loud noises, flashing lights, people sneaking up on him, and people talking to him when he can’t see them. Wilbur can’t handle jump scares or intentional guilt tripping. I struggle with being yelled at.

“Five, you can come and go from the house as you please, but I need to know where you are. If you’re going too far or are out at night, I might have you take someone with you. But besides those, that’s pretty much it. Does that sound fair?”

“Yeah,” Tommy mutters in agreement, only really paying attention to half of Phil’s words.

“Okay. Good. If for some reason you’re struggling with any of the rules, we can discuss them. And feel free to add your own boundaries and trigger to the list, alright?”

“Okay,” Tommy agrees, not really knowing what Phil’s saying, but deciding it’s better to just agree. It’s almost always better to agree.

“That’s pretty much it,” Phil says, “but I did want to talk about... Tommy I knew the foster system is not the kindest. I want to offer the support of therapy or counselling if you would be interested.

Tommy scoffs. He may be messed up, but he knows how to handle it. He doesn’t need some random person telling him bullshit. Plus, therapy is a lot of money and Tommy’s not about to be that indebted to Phil, even if he was interested.

“No thanks,” he says tersely.

“Alright then,” Phil says, standing, “Well feel free to settle in. Dinner will be at 6:30, I’ll have one of the boys grab you.”

Tommy nods, and with the dismissal, scurries away as unobtrusively as possible. He makes it out of the room, and then up the stairs. He gets past Wilbur's room (who's door is cracked open, music faintly wafting out). He finally reaches his own door, and opens it with shaking fingers before slipping inside. He swiftly closes the door behind him, leaning against it heavily.

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Slowly, Tommy begins to unpack the few things he has from his trash bag, as well as the gifts he has been given.

House 8. He's got this.

Chapter End Notes

This has all been completed beforehand, and I plan to put out a new chapter every four to seven days. Not exactly sure yet.

But yeah, I've always loved foster fics but I feel like a lot of them don't have a lot of understanding of how the foster system works. which is okay! oftentimes your not reading those fics to learn about the foster system lol. but i wanted to highlight how things like mental illness and neurodivergence get amplified in the system and don't receive proper care. Foster kids with disabilities and mental illness, especially ones that are older, have a much more difficult time being placed with a forever home.

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

[encompass: the sandbox](#): encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

[encompass: behind the scenes](#): an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

all these choices

Chapter Summary

Day two with this weird ass family has Tommy questioning every single rule he's ever learned in the system.

Chapter Notes

TW: internalized ableism, mentions of past aggression, medication, the systemic failure of the foster system

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Night one is surprisingly much more chill than the day. Tommy attends "family" dinner and stays mostly quiet as Phil asks everyone about their days and Techno and Wilbur bicker. He's excused soon enough and he returns to hole up in his room, playing on the old DS he's managed to hang onto and messing with his new phone.

Day 2 starts off similarly overwhelming. He awakes to a loud beeping and the smell of smoke.

The horrible combination of the two has Tommy launching himself out of bed and racing downstairs. He's right behind Phil, who's going equally fast in front of him.

The minute he gets to the ground floor, the issue is apparent. The kitchen is covered in smoke. At least there doesn't seem to be any fire.

Wilbur's fanning the air desperately as Techno sits at the counter, head down and eyes closed. He has the same headphones on as yesterday and keeps swiping at his face.

Maybe he got smoke in his eye or something.

Phil, confirming that both of them are alright, starts opening windows which dramatically decreases the accumulating smoke. Soon after, the fire alarm stops.

The room falls mostly silent, except for a soft whining noise. Tommy realizes that said noise is coming from Techno.

It's then Tommy remembers what Phil said about Techno not liking loud noises the other day.

Phil approaches him slowly, crouching down to be on Techno's level. He says something softly and Techno shakes his head and flat out hisses at Phil, leaning away. Techno then starts to rock. Tommy's a bit taken aback from the audacity of Techno to actually flat out hiss at Phil. He expects some kind of verbal berating from Phil, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Phil stands, nods in understanding and takes a step back to check on Wilbur. The other boy is apologizing profusely, and Tommy watches as the other boy gets more and more out of breath until he's hardly breathing as he says sorry on rushed repeat.

Phil soothingly comforts him, saying kind words before hugging him close, and Wilbur begins to breathe again.

It's an incredibly strange interaction.

"Sorry Tommy," Wilbur throws over, voice not too loud, "Didn't mean to freak everyone out. I was trying to make breakfast for your first morning."

Tommy blinks. Wilbur tried to make him breakfast? Why? Why is everyone being so nice to him?

Tommy hates not knowing, hates being stuck outside the loop.

Maybe this is their plan, lull him into a false sense of security before going hard.

"Yeah," Tommy says, "my favorite thing about smoke is how incredibly edible it is."

He should have said thanks. So far, all they've been is nice but Tommy can't trust nice, and it's better to protect himself first.

Wilbur ducks his head, face flushing as he fiddles with his fingers.

Tommy shifts his attention back to Techno who has stopped rocking and swiping at his face.

"What's wrong with him?" he asks.

Wilbur immediately bristles, standing tall to his full height.

"Nothing," he hisses out.

So that's a sore spot. Good to know. Tommy can use that if there's ever a need.

"Techno got overwhelmed," Phil cuts in, giving a proper explanation, "There's nothing wrong with him. He's struggling to process sensory input right now."

Whatever the fuck that means.

Tommy hovers.

"I'll make breakfast," Phil decides, "want to join us at the table Tommy?"

Tommy stills, hating the idea of another option. In just one day this family has given him more choices than any family ever has and he doesn't know what to do with it. He doesn't know which answers are right and which are wrong.

But Phil seems to want him to stay, so that's probably the correct answer.

Hesitantly, he walks forward, taking a seat at the table. Wilbur somewhat joins him, taking a seat on the table itself to get out of Phil's way.

"Tommy, do you like waffles?" Phil asks.

"Whatever's fine," he mutters.

Phil hums, and sets back to the kitchen, beginning to recover whatever breakfast Wilbur had been trying to make.

Tommy waits awkwardly, not having anything to do but sit there. Wilbur pulls out his phone and Techno continues to do- whatever it is that he's doing.

Tommy bounces his leg, and waits, bored and confused. Wilbur looks up at the motion and stands. Tommy immediately stops the leg bouncing, freezing. Okay, no fidgeting in this house. Good to know. He probably looks impatient, or uncaring, or inattentive.

He's not. He promises. He just needs to move.

Well, to be fair, sometimes he is impatient and inattentive but he can't stop that even when he tries. But he promises he's not uncaring. People always tend to think that he doesn't care because he can't focus. That isn't true at all.

He stills and takes a deep breath as Wilbur walks away.

The older boy quickly returns with a cube that he passes over to Tommy. The same cube thing that was in the box Tommy received yesterday, except this one is white and blue, unlike the grey and black one he received.

Tommy hesitates, but under Wilbur's watchful eye, picks up the cube. Each side is different, with buttons, nobs, and switches. Tommy hesitantly flicks the side with the switch.

The sound rings out across the room, and Tommy freezes.

But all Wilbur does is give him a smile before turning back to his phone.

Hesitantly, Tommy flicks the switch again. The noise is just as loud, making Tommy wince, but the motion is soothing. He moves on, exploring the cube and finds a small round ball half buried in the box that makes little noise when he moves it. It also presses down, making a satisfying snap, but once more it's a loud noise in a quiet room, so Tommy settles for turning it instead.

Techno at some point stands, and joins the two of them at the table, sitting in the chair nearest Wilbur, who still elects to sit on top of the table. Techno pushes one of his fingers against the

edge of his headphones, carefully knocking one of the sides off his ear. He waits for a second, before fully grabbing the headphones and pulling them off to resettle around his neck.

"Sorry," Wilbur apologizes quietly when the headphones are fully removed.

"It's fine," Techno dismisses, before turning his attention to Tommy. The older boy doesn't meet his gaze, instead dropping to his hands where he fiddles with the cube. "Morning Tommy," he greets.

"Morning," Tommy says, before they all fall back into a heavy silence.

Techno mutters something with a hiss at one point, but Tommy can't hear what he says clearly and doesn't bother to ask him to repeat.

"Wil, can you grab plates?" Phil asks, breaking the ice. "Techno, cups and silverware. Tommy, mind grabbing the orange juice and milk from the fridge?" The two older boys get up to get what they were asked, and Tommy hesitantly follows, going straight to the fridge and grabbing the two easily identifiable drinks. He turns, holding them both awkwardly, and sees Wilbur and Techno setting the table. He stumbles forward, putting his own things on the table and hoping he's done everything right.

Techno and Wilbur both take seats, Techno in the one he had settled in earlier, and Wilbur finally actually sitting in a chair instead of on the table. Tommy hesitantly grabs one, and Phil brings over an abundance of food before sitting himself.

Phil sits at the head of the table, Techno on the side to his right, and Wilbur on the other to his left. Tommy sits next to Wilbur and really hopes that's an acceptable choice.

No one has said anything so far, so it's probably fine.

The three of them all start grabbing food, passing platters around the table. Tommy quickly ends up with waffles, fruit, and eggs heading his way.

He panics, realizing no one has told him how much he's allowed to have. Should he ask? Or is it safer to guess?

"How- how much can I have?" Tommy says weakly.

"Try to make sure everyone gets a bit of everything," Phil tells him, "but you can have as much as you want. I can always make more."

As much as Tommy wants, or as much as Phil expects Tommy to want? He hates how unclear everything in this house is turning out to be. Quickly, he looks over at other plates and does his best to serve himself a median amount of everyone else's.

No one says anything, so Tommy assumes he's passed another test. He eats silently, and quickly, even as the other three talk around him. Techno asks Wilbur something about music and Wilbur brightens quickly, going on a rant. Tommy zones out, studying the kitchen. It's fairly neat, most of the house is. The only thing that could be considered messy is the

refrigerator, which is covered in magnets, papers, and millions of photos. The photos all center on Techno, Wilbur, and occasionally both of them, sometimes with Phil.

The most useful piece of information found is a photo of a considerably younger Techno. Before puberty, surely. Tommy's never been good at guessing ages but he's got to be in the preteens somewhere. In contrast, the oldest photo of Wilbur he can find can only be a few years old at most.

Techno's been here longer then.

"Tommy? Did you hear me?" Phil asks. Tommy jumps, refocusing on Phil.

He didn't mean to zone out. He never does. He just... can't help it. No matter how hard he tries.

"Uh..." Tommy says, desperately trying to figure out what he's missed.

"I asked if you wanted to go to the store today, tomorrow, or another day," Phil repeats.

The store? Does Phil really not trust him to stay home alone while he does errands?

Who is Tommy kidding, Phil's seen his record, knows his history of misbehavior. No wonder Tommy's having to accompany him.

"Whenever works, I don't care" Tommy mutters, doing his best to be casual and seem uninterested. May as well get it over with.

"Okay, we can leave in an hour-ish, sound good?"

Tommy nods.

"What should I do with my dishes?" he asks.

"Rinse it off in the sink and then put it in the dishwasher," Phil tells him, "You can go ahead and get ready if you want."

Tommy nods, glad to have the option to escape, and gets up quickly. He rinses off his plate and puts it in the dishwasher as told. He's not sure if they have any strict rules about where dishes go in the dishwasher like house 5, but he does his best by looking at the few dirty dishes already in it. He places his silverware down, and hopes that's how the rest of the house does it.

With that, he scuttles back to his room for some peace and quiet.

He's got plenty of time before he has to leave with Phil, so he falls back onto his bed and pulls out his prized possession, an old DS that's been stolen and reclaimed multiple times. He opens it up and powers it on, slowly loading up the Pokémon game he's beaten 15 times already. He quickly gets sucked back in, and starts exploring the newest city.

A moment later and there's a knock on his door.

“Tommy, you ready to go?”

Tommy startles, almost dropping the DS and quickly glancing at the time. There’s no way it's already been an hour, but the clock seems to say differently.

“Uh,” Tommy says, desperately trying to figure out what to do. He’s still in an old t-shirt and shorts from when he woke up to the fire alarm this morning and didn’t get the chance to shower last night. He’s way behind.

“It’s fine if you need a bit more time,” Phil says through the door.

Tommy stills and his heart pounds. Cautiously, he decides to take a risk. After all, this house keeps him guessing, so it would at least be good to get down a baseline.

“Can I take a shower first?” he asks.

“Sure. Meet me downstairs in 20 minutes? Does that sound good?”

He... he said yes. That hadn’t been what Tommy was expecting. Phil had given him an hour warning and Tommy had completely forgotten and Phil was giving him extra time, no questions asked. He didn’t even seem upset! And Tommy was keeping him from things he needed to do. What was this family?

“Yeah,” Tommy says, “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Tommy waits a minute as footsteps fade before leaping off of his bed. He grabs a fresh set of clothes and his new towels before leaving his room and entering the bathroom. It takes him a minute to figure out the shower- each house is always different- and to grab everything he needs from under the sink. Wilbur’s seemed nice so far, but his past foster siblings have all been weirdly protective over soap and shampoo and Tommy doesn’t want to risk that fight. Plus Wilbur said he could use anything under the sink.

He showers quickly, throwing on his clothes. He brushes his teeth, returning the new toothbrush to the slot next to Wilbur’s. The domesticity of it makes Tommy sick. He grabs an unopened thing of deodorant and uses that, before opening the side cabinet to put it away. Wilbur’s deodorant- or Tommy assumes it’s Wilbur’s- is there as well, in addition to an orange pill bottle.

Curious, Tommy grabs it.

Prescribed to Soot, Wilbur. Tommy doesn’t remember what Amelia said Phil’s last name was, but it definitely wasn’t that. The medication name- Prozac- is unfamiliar, but Tommy didn’t really expect otherwise. It’s not like he knows anything about medicine.

It’s about one third full and on the side are instructions and warnings. Take one by mouth each morning. Don’t drink alcohol, breastfeed, or operate heavy machinery. Interesting.

Tommy returns it to the cabinet exactly where he found it and exits the bathroom. He grabs a pair of his new socks and throws on his shoes before making his way downstairs.

He's greeted with a full living room.

Instantly, Tommy stiffens, feeling like he's walking into a trap. But no one seems to be paying him much attention.

In fact, Phil is on his phone while Techno and Wilbur squabble about something on the couch. Techno gives Wilbur a slight nudge with his feet and Wilbur throws a pillow at him in retaliation.

"Dad!" Techno complains, "Wilbur threw a pillow at me."

"Wilbur stop throwing pillows at your brother."

"But he's not sharing the couch!" Wilbur protests.

"Techno, share the couch with your brother."

"I got here first!" Techno complains.

"You don't own the couch," Phil says right back.

Tommy awkwardly hovers, not knowing if he should interrupt or wait them out.

Luckily he doesn't have to make a decision, because Techno catches sight of him.

"Look who decided to show up," he says gruffly.

Tommy winces internally, but doesn't let it show. He can't show weakness. Instead he puffs up, ready to give a firm rebuttal, but Wilbur beats him to it.

"Techno, you literally just got out here as well."

Techno huffs, but doesn't refute Wilbur's point.

"Okay problem children 1, 2, and Tommy, to the car, march!" Phil interrupts, making his way to the door.

Techno rolls off the couch, pushing Wilbur with him and they jostle each other all the way to the front door.

Phil stands as well, staring expectantly at Tommy.

"They're coming too?" Tommy asks. Tommy wouldn't have thought Phil would make them go. It makes sense Tommy hasn't earned Phil's trust, but Tommy is surprised to know that neither Techno or Wilbur make the cut as well.

Maybe that's going to be what makes house 8 what it is. Zero distance, zero trust. It makes sense, Tommy's pretty much been surrounded by all three of the family members the entire time he's been here.

"Yeah," Phil says, "Is that okay?"

"...Yes?" Tommy hesitates, having no clue what he's being asked.

Phil brightens, grin stretching across his face and Tommy knows he made the right decision.

"Okay then, let's go," Phil says, and the two of them head out the door.

Techno and Wilbur have already both made it into the car, and the moment Tommy opens the door, he's met with more bickering. Wilbur and Techno seem to be fighting over the front seat, which Wilbur has managed to slide into.

"I'm older! And taller!" Wilbur protests.

"Barely!" Techno says, "this is both ageist and heightist. Plus, I've lived here longer, I have time superiority."

"Boys," Phil says, as he slips into the driver's seat. They both fall quiet, but Techno crosses his arms and grumbles.

"Tech, did you grab your headphones?" Phil asks, looking in the rearview mirror at Techno and him.

Techno pats his neck, coming to the realization that his headphones are very much not there and curses before leaping out of the car. Tommy watches as he darts back in, before almost immediately exiting back out the house with the headphones Tommy has started to associate with him. He climbs back inside, buckling his seatbelt fluidly.

"Good," he says, giving Phil a thumbs up. Phil nods and starts the car, pulling out of the driveway.

Two minutes in and Tommy is reminded of how much he hates car rides. They're so boring, and there's nothing to do. He could have brought his new phone but honestly forgot about it. And it's not like he has anything entertaining on it anyways. He's not sure if he's allowed to play games on it, and decided the risk wasn't worth it.

He starts bouncing his leg and staring at the window, counting how many signs they pass. He doesn't get past six, mostly because he keeps losing track and having to restart.

Techno is similarly restless besides him, bouncing his leg to the same rhythm as Tommy's and playing with his twisty noodle again.

Wilbur fiddles with the radio in the front, constantly flipping through channels to find something he likes. He frowns, complaining that nothing good is on, and half-heartedly settles on some sort of upbeat pop. The minute he does Techno groans loudly.

"Absolutely not."

"It's not a bad song!" Wilbur protests, as if he hadn't just said nothing good was on and criticized the pop industry less than a minute ago.

"It has five words that continuously repeat," Techno complains. "It's so annoying. Almost fucking worse than the voices, and that's saying something."

"Well then put on your headphones," Wilbur responds.

Techno groans once more, but does as suggested. Wilbur starts to sing out loud to the song

"They're going to need to make better noise cancelling technology just to block out your stupid voice," Techno mutters, leaning back in his seat.

Wilbur just turns to flip Techno off and begins to sing louder.

At least his voice is nice, Tommy muses, even if he is loud. Really loud actually. Combined with the music, it's a lot, enough that it presses down on Tommy's entire body and he loses count of his signs once again.

He shrinks into himself more and restarts his count.

The station turns over to a commercial and the voices start to flow less smoothly, jabbing into Tommy's brain. Before long, a song starts back up and Wilbur returns to his singing. He also turns the volume up, the boom of the bass in his ears making Tommy wince.

They go under a tunnel and half the song starts to screech static. Tommy doesn't realize he's trembling until his forehead hits the window.

"Wilbur," Techno hisses, adding more noise to the chaos, "Wilbur, music off."

"Nope!" Wilbur says all too gleefully and Tommy hates him for it.

"Wilbur I'm serious," Techno insists. Wilbur turns, catching sight of Techno and obviously seeing something in his face, because he shuts the music off.

Tommy trembles, feeling his heart pound in his chest. The silence is a blessing, and he finds himself able to breathe again.

"Tech?" Phil asks from the front, looking back at him from the rearview mirror.

"Tommy, you alright?" Techno also, voice the softest Tommy has heard it so far.

He jumps, not expecting to be addressed.

"Fine," he mutters, doing his best to get attention off him.

Techno hesitates, but says no more.

"This works anyways," Phil cuts in, "we can plan. Tommy, do you need clothes?"

"What?" Tommy asks, blinking.

"How much clothes do you have? You're tall, so you must grow out of what you own pretty quick. I'm guessing you didn't come with much."

"Uh... no," Tommy admits. It's a blessing and curse that he's currently growing so much. On one hand, he's getting the most new clothes he's ever gotten in the foster system. On the other hand, while it is the most, it's not really quite enough to be comfortable in. But Tommy lives, it's not really a big deal.

"Same here," Wilbur says, "when I first got placed with Phil the only jacket I had was a size too small."

"So you need more clothes?" Phil confirms.

"I... I mean I'm okay," Tommy says.

"Do you have enough clothes for every day of the week?" Phil asks.

"No," Tommy admits.

But really, he doesn't need that much clothes. Things can be reworn a few times before needing to get washed. He gets by.

"Okay, Wil, add clothes to a list."

Wilbur pulls out his phone, typing something in as Tommy half splutters in the background, floundering.

"Snacks too," Phil muses, and Wilbur continues to type.

"Stim stuff, hobbies," Techno interjects.

"Hmm, right," Phil agrees and Wilbur adds them.

"Room stuff," Wilbur adds himself.

"Good. Tommy- what are your hobbies."

"I uh... what?" Tommy asks. He's so lost and has no idea what's going on anymore. "I thought- didn't you need to go shopping?"

"Yes?" Phil confirms, a faint frown spreading across his face. "We're shopping for the things you need. Which is why I'm having Wilbur make a list."

Tommy splutters.

"We're shopping for me?" he asks. Why- why are they doing this? He's had families get things for him before, sure. But most of it was chosen for it. He got a football as a gift in one house and Tommy didn't touch it once.

He's never had a family take him shopping for him to pick out things his first week. Even clothes had been often estimated, or they had asked his size and selected him things for him.

A few houses had bothered to get him anything, and others hadn't been able to afford it.

Wilbur has turned to stare at him, tilting his head and examining Tommy. Tommy looks down, hating the feeling of being watched.

"Of course," Phil says, "I know it can all be a lot at first, so if it gets too much we can leave and finish another day. I want to at least get you some more clothes though. And a pair of shoes."

"Shoes?" Tommy asks, looking down at his own self consciously.

"When's the last time you got new shoes?" Techno asks.

Tommy hesitates, considering. It hadn't been that long ago. The growth spurts helped, he tended to get new stuff when he got taller. But a few months ago his toes had started to cram against the front, and when he had mentioned it, nothing had happened.

"Do you want new clothes, or would you rather shop used?" Phil asks.

"I- what's the difference?" Tommy asks.

"I had trouble getting clothes at first," Techno admits, "cause all the new stuff, was a lot, y'know. So second-hand stores are less... sparkly. If you want."

"The point is for you to be comfortable with the new things you need," Phil says, "Because Tommy, even when the system does try- and we both know it doesn't always try- kids never have enough of the things they need. You do need more things. But we don't want to overwhelm you. So whatever you want to do."

"I..." Tommy swallows. They keep giving him choices and he can't figure out why. When Tommy got into the foster system, the first thing he learned was that nothing was his. His bed, his clothes, his life were owned by the state. Occasionally families would rent him out, but nothing was up to Tommy.

This one family has presented him with more choices than he's had since he was first dumped into the hands of the state.

Wilbur catches his gaze, and offers a small smile. Tommy gulps and looks down at his lap, twisting his hands together.

"What if we start somewhere with a bunch of stuff?" Wilbur suggests, "Clothes included. We can get things that Tommy needs and if he finds some clothes he likes as well, then it's a double win."

"Sounds great," Phil agrees. "How's that sound to you Tommy?"

No, it doesn't sound fine. In fact it's all incredibly overwhelming and Tommy doesn't know how to respond. They seem genuine and Tommy... well he probably should thank them but he doesn't know them, doesn't know how long the kindness will last.

"I mean if you wanna buy me shit, go ahead," Tommy grumbles. He's pushing it he knows. If he stays gruff like this, they'll eventually give up on being nice. But Phil gives him a smile

and refocuses on the road.

Tommy leans back in his seat and once again zones out, worrying about the upcoming shopping trip.

Chapter End Notes

Hope yall enjoy. I'm really loving this fic and exploring the characters. I also can't wait until tommy gets more exposure to adhd terms and shit. hes dealing w/ hardcore internalized ableism.

Comment if you want, i always love reading them :D

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

[encompass: the sandbox](#): encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

[encompass: behind the scenes](#): an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

fitting in and standing out

Chapter Summary

Tommy goes shopping and attempts to figure out where he fits in with the dynamic of this weird-ass family. It's harder than it seems, because nothing about them makes sense.

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: misunderstanding, internalized ableism, brief mentions of physical fight/injury, overall shittiness of the foster system

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When they first arrive at the store, they converge around the car. Tommy's already taken a few steps toward the store, but quickly falters when he sees that the other three have all gathered around one another.

"Game plan," Phil says, "we go I'm, Wilbur has the list. If anyone gets overwhelmed, needs a break, or needs to leave for any reason, let me know and we can do that. If we're split up and you need a break, text me. Sound good?"

Wilbur and Techno nod. Tommy thinks about mentioning that he didn't bring his phone, but it's not like they're going to leave him alone anyways and they're already moving toward the store.

Tommy hurries to catch up.

Techno immediately scowls when they enter, holding a hand over his eyes like a visor.

"Fucking fluorescents," he mutters. Tommy stares. Techno catches his look, giving him a glare for a millisecond. Tommy drops his own gaze to the floor, doing his best to not look like a threat. Techno's obviously the tougher of the two, and Tommy really doesn't want to get in a fight with him.

Tommy has height, but he's incredibly scrawny. Techno's not exactly muscular, but he's got a lot more definition and tone than Tommy does, with the advantage of age- potential experience. Plus, something about him exudes confidence. He could beat Tommy up easily.

Tommy may be a fuck up, but he's not an idiot. He's not about to challenge Techno.

Wilbur makes a beeline for the dollar section, Techno trailing after him, shoving his hands in his pockets as Phil grabs a cart from the front. Tommy stands awkwardly in the path between the two groups, getting into numerous people's way.

He winces each time a person gets blocked by him, moving swiftly to the side only to run into someone else. It's a horrible game of pinball but Tommy doesn't know the group he's supposed to go with so he bounces around until Phil heads his way and then passes him to meet up with the boys.

Tommy hurries after.

Techno and Wilbur are muttering over things in the dollar section, Wilbur pointing out scented pens and Techno saying something along the lines of Wilbur being an actual five year old.

Phil herds them towards the home section and they go without much trouble, Wilbur sliding in the pack of pens behind Phil's back.

Tommy catches the action and Wilbur sees him looking, raising a finger to his lips and winking.

Tommy's heart pounds, caught in a dilemma. Wilbur asked him to keep quiet so obviously Phil doesn't approve of the pens being bought but Tommy can't tell him because Wilbur told him to be quiet.

But if Phil finds out Tommy knew, will he get in trouble alongside Wilbur? But if Tommy tells Phil, how will Wilbur punish him?

Tommy shakes, scrambling to figure out the best solution.

He decides to stay quiet. After all, he's never been seriously hurt by a foster parent before. Shoved around, denied food, shut in a room- sure, but never really injured.

The same cannot be said about other foster siblings.

Tommy says nothing.

"Is there anything you want for your room?" Phil asks.

Tommy balks.

"Uh, I'm okay?" he tries.

"Different sheets? Different comforter?" Phil asks, "any particular color you like?"

"Uhhhh."

"What's your favorite color tommy?" Techno asks

"Uh... I like red and-" purple's too girly, "blue."

Techno nods and shuffles away. Phil let's him and Wilbur drag them further down the aisle, pointing out all the decorative pillows that are apparently a "necessity" for Tommy's room.

Tommy stares straight, mind turning at all of the options being presented to him. Wilbur shows him one only to be halfway to the next and Tommy's still confused about why he ever needs one in the first place.

"Wil, let's check out blankets and desk lights and then we can maybe come back," Phil suggests. He looks down at Tommy and gives him a smile, as if they have some sort of secret. Tommy shifts on his feet, and glances away.

"Would you like a weighted blanket?" Phil asks as they step into the new aisle.

"Uhhhh," Tommy stammers, "a what?"

"A weighted blanket," Wilbur pipes up, "they're really nice and help you calm down. It's pretty much just a really heavy blanket. Everyone in the family has one."

"Some people don't like them because they can be a bit confining," Phil explains, "but many people, especially neurodivergent people, find them comforting due to the pressure they apply."

"Neurodivergent?" Tommy asks.

Wilbur gives him an odd look.

"Yes," Phil explains, "have you not heard that word before?"

Tommy shakes his head and Wilbur frowns.

"Neurodivergent are people with atypical minds," Phil says, "there's no strict definition, but mental illness and disabilities such as autism and adhd fall under the category. Everyone in our household, you now included, happens to be neurodivergent."

Oh. It's one of those things to make him less adhd. Tommy doesn't get how a blanket is supposed to help make him not adhd, but it doesn't seem to be a harm. Tommy's not looking forward to when he'll inevitably be punished for losing track or zoning out or forgetting something. If a blanket somehow makes Phil happy, Tommy's willing to try it. Maybe he won't get in as much trouble with it.

"Sure," he says.

Phil and Wilbur both smile, white teeth glittering. Tommy takes it as the approval that it is.

"What color?" Wilbur asks.

Tommy looks where he's gesturing, observing the plain brown, blue, and grey ones as well as the outlier purple. It's a nice color, a deep plum that Tommy is particularly fond of. But Tommy knows that in a house of three boys there's a good chance he's not going to be allowed to like girly colors.

"Purple?" Wilbur asks, catching his gaze and already grabbing it.

"Uh," Tommy says, "I uh, don't really care. Any color's fine."

"Do you like the purple?" Phil asks.

"No," Tommy says, instantly, "not really. It's too girly."

Phil and Wilbur both freeze. Tommy's done something wrong but he doesn't know what. Maybe they know he's lying. Damn it, why does he have to like a girl color?

"Girly isn't a bad thing," Wilbur protests.

Tommy's heart thuds.

"Tommy," Phil says, much more gently, "colors don't have gender. You can like whatever colors you want. Gender is a social construct. In this house, you can be as feminine or masculine as you please."

Tommy doesn't understand about half of that but he thinks he gets that purple doesn't equal bad.

"Uh okay."

Wilbur nods, "so purple?"

Tommy hesitates one last time before steeling himself. He nods.

"Purple."

Wil sets the blanket in the cart and they move onto desk lights.

Tommy selects one of the cheapest he can find. He's not sure if he'll really use it, but Phil seems to want him to get one, so he'll just get something inexpensive to please him.

Techno returns around that time with a couple different sets of sheets that he sets out on a spot of empty shelving.

"What's this?" Wilbur asks with a laugh, grabbing a set of sheets that is an odd outlier. Each set has some form of red on them, except the one Wilbur's holding which instead has penguins.

"Had to grab it," Techno says, "they demanded it."

Wilbur laughs, while Tommy puzzles over who 'they' is.

"Pick one," Techno says, gruff as ever.

Tommy stares at the choices, curious.

"Pick your favorite," Techno clarifies.

Tommy spends a few seconds staring and then grabs a red and white striped set. Techno nods and piles the rest back into his arms before leaving again.

Tommy awkwardly holds the set he picked.

"You can put it in the cart if you want," Phil says, as he holds onto it for a bit too long.

Tommy nods, and drops it in. Techno returns the rest of the sheets to their respective places before rejoining them, noticeably still hanging onto the penguin sheets and frowning down at the set.

Phil walks over to him, and places a hand on his shoulder, saying something. Tommy starts to listen but is quickly pulled away by Wilbur once again squealing over decorative pillows.

When Tommy turns back to them, the penguin sheets are gone.

They continue on, cart pipe growing larger and larger as they pass more aisles. Wilbur keeps pointing out room decorations, insisting he get them, and Phil continuously calms him, reminding Tommy that it's his choice, and to pick the things he wants.

Tommy stumbles through it all, trying to keep his head down and his mouth quiet. He's intentionally short and vague with his answers, doing his best to be difficult enough where he doesn't push what he's allowed to get, but also doesn't get in trouble. Luckily, Wilbur seems to catch the hint because he drops his shoulders with a sigh and stops insisting on random things.

Techno's the more irritating one, catching when Tommy's eyes linger on certain things and picking them up without asking before throwing them in the cart.

That's how Tommy ends up with a bulletin board, a thing to sort supplies on his desk, and a new water bottle.

Phil also has him choose a backpack and when he selects a grey one with red highlights, things start to calm down. Wilbur finally stopped shoving things his way, and Techno has stopped watching him like a hawk.

"Let's look at clothes," Phil suggests, and they move to the middle of the store.

Clothes are hard, because once again he's constantly being asked his preference. But they seem to genuinely want to get him things and Tommy's gone a long time without choosing his own clothes.

Maybe this will crash and burn. Maybe he's not going to be here for long, but if this family really is willing to spend things on him then he'll take it.

He gets a bit more confident, choosing a variety of clothes and finally having enough things to last him through a week. He doesn't find shoes he likes, but Phil promises they can go to an actual shoe store soon.

And just when Tommy thinks they're done, he's dragged to one last section, the toy aisle.

He bristles as they herd him in the direction, adamantly refusing to take a step in. He's a teenager! He doesn't need to go through aisles of stuffed animals and legos, even if some of the sets do look really cool.

Techno leads the small group, quickly picking something up and dropping it in the cart.

"Techno, do you really need more stim toys?" Phil asks.

"Yes," Techno responds, voice monotone in a way that Tommy is learning is normal for him "Always."

Phil chuckles, but doesn't protest, allowing the object to stay there. It's at least the third time since Tommy's arrived that they've mentioned that word, and Tommy has no clue what it means.

"What's a stim toy?" he asks.

Techno stares and Wilbur gives him an odd look as well. Phil catches his words and frowns.

"Something to... y'know... stim with," Techno says, which clarifies zero things.

"What's stim?" Tommy asks.

"Y'know how we were talking about neurodivergent earlier Tommy?" Phil asks. Tommy nods. "Right so everyone stims, but neurodivergent people, especially those who are autistic or have adhd, stim more than most. Stimming is a behavior that is often repetitively used to interact with or process the environment around you. They can calm you down, show excitement, or help you process overwhelming sensory input."

Tommy blinks and frowns up at Phil. He's doing a pretty shit job at explaining this concept.

"The leg bouncing," Wilbur interjects, "or how you're tapping your fingers right now."

Tommy looks down at his hand, noticing how his digits dance across his pants. He instantly stops, flattening his hand against his leg.

"Those are stims. And certain items are made with stimulating in mind, those are stim toys. They can help with adhd."

Tommy nods.

He understands now. It's one more thing to get rid of adhd and use against him. Like the blanket. Hopefully these stim toys aren't too bad.

Tommy reluctantly grabs two and they finally, finally move forward to pay.

"Hey Wil, why don't you and Tommy go wait outside," Phil suggests, "Techno and I can pay and bring everything out. Sound good?"

Wilbur frowns, and Phil gives him a look. Tommy's not sure what it's supposed to be, but Wilbur obviously does because he agrees quickly and herds Tommy out of the store.

Tommy scowls at the treatment, but goes with him, awkwardly standing outside of the large building.

"So..." Wilbur says awkwardly.

Tommy raises his eyebrows at him.

"Uh..."

Wilbur being lost for words is something Tommy has yet to experience. So far the older boy has practically talked nonstop since Tommy arrived.

"How are you liking it so far?" Wilbur asks.

Tommy shrugs.

It's hard. That's the truth. This house is so different from anywhere else he's been and he doesn't know where he stands.

At this point he usually knows the base rules and how to get around without getting in trouble. He also knows if his foster siblings are on his side. Tommy has none of that here.

Wilbur and Techno both seem nice enough, if a bit over eager and grouchy respectively, but they're so obviously loyal to Phil.

Tommy doesn't trust them to not go running to Phil the minute he does anything wrong.

"It's not shit," he answers, "Been to places that were a lot worse."

He keeps his voice rough and posture straight. He's shorter than Wil, but not by much and he knows he's at the disadvantage of being the new kid, so he'll have to make up for that by convincing Wilbur that he has more experience with the system.

"Well that's good?" Wilbur offers, and they fall back into uneasy silence.

It's very awkward, and Tommy begins to bounce his foot against the pavement.

"Y'know," Wilbur says, speaking up once more, "it's uh, it's okay if it's hard at first. My first weeks- months really- were hard too."

Tommy glances up at Wilbur, surprised at the admission. He's never had a foster sibling admit that before. They all know that there's only so many places. In the past, his foster siblings have been competitors, not friends. He's surprised Wilbur's reaching out with kindness instead of telling him to suck it up and get over himself.

Maybe it's because he's already been adopted. Phil can't exactly return him.

"How long have you been here?" Tommy asks.

"Three years. Got placed with Phil on my 15th birthday actually. Adoption papers went through a little less than two years ago."

Tommy nods, staring at his feet.

"Y'know, Phil wants to adopt you too," Wilbur comments and Tommy absolutely freezes. "He fosters to adopt. He's- I don't think he planned- I mean he wasn't- well you should ask Techno. Techno was placed with him first. But Phil- Phil wants you to be part of our family. He won't force you, and he won't ask you until you get settled in more, and you can say no. I did at first. But he wants you to stay with us."

"You said no?"

"Yeah," Wilbur admits. "I uh- well I was only in the system for two years after my aunt and uncle died. They raised me since I was little. But then Phil swoops in and I guess I felt like he was trying to replace them? So I said no at first." Wilbur shrugs and stares up at the sky, "I dunno. One day I guess... well I woke up and realized that I wanted to be Phil's. Officially. On paper."

Tommy listens, scuffing his feet on the floor.

He can't imagine actually staying in some place for forever. Someone wanting him and Tommy wanting them back. The idea seems so foreign.

"You said Techno was first?" Tommy asks.

"Yeah," Wilbur agrees, "what... five, six years ago now? He was eleven. If you ask him and you're not an asshole about it, he'll probably share."

"Why me?" Tommy asked, "why a third?"

Wilbur shrugs, coat twitching up with him at the movement.

"I dunno," he admits, "a few months ago, things were off. Not bad, but... I don't know. And then Phil brought up the idea. At first, I wasn't sure. But we talked about it and well I think another kid brother was exactly what was missing. Couple weeks down the line and Phil saw your file for the first time and," Wilbur smiles, throwing his hands to his sides slightly. "And he just knew. We all knew, y'know?"

Tommy's throat hurts, and he doesn't know why. There seems to be a blockage but when he swallows the odd lump still says. He doesn't get this family.

"I'm not your brother," he bites out and wait, no, that's not what he meant to say. God why did he do that? Wilbur and him were talking and Tommy actually liked him but his big fat mouth had to go ruin it again for him.

Wilbur's face is stricken. He covers it up quickly, before glancing away, but Tommy knows what he's said.

"Right. Sorry," Wilbur offers and his tone makes Tommy want to take it all back.

"Boys! We're done!" calls a voice that is slowly becoming more and more familiar and Tommy turns to see Phil and Techno with a cart full of bags.

"Wil, I'm assuming the scented pencils are yours?" Phil asks, mouth twitching as he holds up the offending items Phil had slipped in earlier.

"Yeah," Wil mutters, not looking back and starting in the direction of the car.

Phil's smile drops and he looks at Tommy.

Tommy's heart pounds. Shit, he's upset one of Phil's real kids, Phil's probably going to be so pissed. Tommy's done it now.

Phil continues forward and Tommy breathes, hoping that he has a bit until whatever punishment he receives. Techno doesn't seem to have the same amount of sympathy, shouldering past Tommy roughly, and racing over to Wilbur's side.

Tommy pulls himself into a limp puddle of a human, shuffling into the car as quickly as he can, and zoning out of reality entirely.

Goddammit he can't just not be a fuck up for once, can he?

They get home and unload things, way too many bags being dropped off in Tommy's room. He zones out through it all, body going through the motions but not comprehending anything around him.

He gets his room fairly set up and lays on his unfinished bed (he couldn't figure out the sheets) to stare at the ceiling.

Eventually, there's a knock at the door.

"Yeah?" he asks, and the door nudges open, revealing Techno.

Tommy looks at him, but Techno doesn't do anything, instead just standing in the doorway. He studies Tommy's room in sections, almost as if he's memorizing it.

"Can I help you?"

Techno's gaze snaps to his, before dropping to the bed beneath Tommy.

"Do you need help with your sheets?" he asks.

"I'm fine," Tommy huffs.

"Can I come in?" Techno asks.

"No."

Techno nods, hovering at the door. Tommy's surprised to see that he listens.

"Fitted sheets are difficult. Especially when they're brand new and haven't been stretched out a little. Holler if you need help."

Techno turns to leave and before Tommy knows what he's doing, he calls out.

"Wait!"

He's not sure why he calls out. He's used to foster siblings teaming up against him, not being his friend. But Techno and Wil both seem different, and maybe... maybe he likes it.

Techno turns back to face him.

"The fitted sheet, is uh, is a little bit difficult," Tommy admits, casting his gaze downward as he runs the back of his head.

Techno nods, still in the doorway.

"You can come in," Tommy offers, "if you're uh, still willing to help."

Techno nods, and steps over the threshold.

Faintly, Tommy realizes that this is the first time since he moved in that someone has set foot in what is now his room.

Techno gestures for him to get off the bed and Tommy jumps off. He helps Tommy wrestle the fitted sheet over the mattress and is kind enough to only snort when Tommy hits himself in the face with the elastic.

Techno even gets the wrinkles out of the corners, something Tommy's never been able to figure out.

When they finish, Techno hovers, staring over at something on his desk.

"You- it's okay to stim," Techno says.

Tommy raises an eyebrow.

"You haven't opened the stim toys," Techno elaborates, "I wanted you to know. It's okay to stim. I was placed with a few foster parents who weren't as great as Phil is. So I get it. But it's fine here."

"Dude I still don't fucking get what it is, but if this is how Phil thinks he's gunna cure my adhd, he's shit of luck. Stuff's incurable."

Techno frowns.

"Of course not," he snaps, "Phil's fine with you having adhd. He just wants to help you!"

"By fixing me?"

"No!" Techno snaps, "no! By providing outlets for adhd behaviors. It's- stimming is, it's good for you."

Techno stands to his full height and Tommy notices how he starts to clench his fists at his sides.

"That what he tells you?" Tommy smirks recognizing he's hit a sore spot.

"What he tells me?" Techno repeats with a hiss, "what he- no! Tommy!" Techno cuts himself off, taking a deep breath. Tommy drums his fingers on his knee.

"Here just... Tommy don't move your hand."

"What? Tommy asks.

"It's-" Techno huffs, shifting in his feet, "I'm tryin' to... Look I want to show you something alright? Jus' stop moving your hand. Don't tap your leg."

Tommy frowns, but stops. He has no idea what Techno's getting at, but whatever the fuck he's doing is at least intriguing. He starts tapping his fingers against his leg.

"Don't do that," Techno says immediately.

Tommy's eyes widen, and he stills his hand, not even realizing he had started tapping again. He huffs and lets his hand fully relax.

With nothing to do, and Techno staring at him intently, his eyes wander around his room. His eyes catch on the closed dresser. He can't see what's inside of it, but he knows that it now holds more new clothes than he's ever had at once in years. He starts shaking his leg and considers the thought.

Has it really been that long since he's had numerous brand new things that belonged all to himself?

"Don't shake your leg," Techno interjects.

Tommy huffs and tools his eyes.

"What, am I not allowed to move?" He bites back sarcastically.

"Yes. Exactly," Techno confirms.

Tommy groans louder and decides he's done with this stupid ass experiment. He goes back to tapping.

"Dude that's literally impossible."

"Exactly," Techno says, "but you weren't moving. Or you were, but you were forgetting, yeah?"

"Yeah?"

"Fidgeting like that is stimming."

Tommy looks up and makes a face.

"It is!" Techno insists, "and it's hard not to, right? Like you said- it's impossible. You need to stim. It's a good thing. It helps."

That... that's a decent point. Tommy's still confused about how the hell this relates back to adhd and neurodi-whatnot but at least Techno is starting to make somewhat sense.

"The stim toys aren't bad," Techno explains, "they just give you more options to stim in different ways. Does that make sense?"

"I think so?"

Techno looks at him, studying him. He seems to do that a lot. The longer he does it, the more Tommy's skin begins to crawl.

Eventually, he nods, and just like that, leaves Tommy's room.

Okay. That happened then.

God what a weird fucking house.

It's after dinner that night that Phil asks Tommy to stay behind.

Tommy freezes, and waits for whatever punishment he's somehow invited upon him. Wilbur and Techno shuffle away and Tommy can't help but feel a bit betrayed, even though neither did anything wrong.

"School starts back up tomorrow," Phil prefaces.

Oh. Right.

"Are you ready to start tomorrow, or do you need a few more days?"

Tommy blinks.

"What?"

"It's been a busy few days," Phil tells him, "and you barely just got here. If you need a few days to settle in before going to school, that's perfectly okay. Just do your best to communicate that with me."

"Uh- no it's okay," Tommy says. Which honestly- he's not sure why he said that. Phil's giving him the option of no school and Tommy just blew past it.

It's- for some weird reason Tommy wants to go. Or that's not completely true, school sucks and he has no desire to attend, but... but he wants to make Phil happy.

Stupid. He's going to fail soon enough, hasn't he learned to stop trying by this point?

"Alright," Phil says, "and like I said, just communicate. Your health and well-being will always come before school. If you're struggling or need a break, let me know. We'll figure it out."

"You're telling me I can ditch school whenever? Drop out?" Tommy asks.

"I don't think kids stop attending school without a reason," Phil explains. "If you're not going to school that means something's wrong. Whether that be a personal issue, family issues, school issues, health issues, or otherwise, there's a reason you're not going. So yes, if you stop going to school I'll let you."

Tommy stares.

"That isn't to say that you can just drop out," Phil says. "There's alternative schooling and the goal is to have you attending school, all I'm saying is that there are more important things in life than school. Does that make sense?"

Kinda. Honestly, Tommy's pretty sure he's more confused than when they started this conversation.

He nods anyways.

"Okay," Phil says, "school starts at 8, you'll need to be on the early side to get your schedule. Wilbur will usually drive you, but I'll take you tomorrow so you can get your stuff and settle in early. What time do you want to leave? It's about a ten minute drive."

Tommy stands there, confused by the question. He's never been given so many options in his lifetime.

"Uh. 7:20?" Tommy suggests, "that'll give me some time."

Phil nods.

"Sound good," he agrees, "please set your own alarm, but I'll check on you to make sure you're up. I'll have breakfast ready. Wilbur will drive you home, text with him and he can't tell you where to go. If you need anything, feel free to text or call me or reach out to Wilbur and Tech. Your IEP plan has transferred over already, but let me know if you have any issues with it."

"Issues with it?" Tommy asks, frowning.

"Yes," Phil agrees, "if teachers or administration aren't respecting it, let me know."

"Isn't it- doesn't it just tell them to not be an asshole to me cause I'm a foster kid?" Tommy asks.

Phil stares, eyes wide.

"No. No Tommy, has no one ever gone over your IEP with you before?"

Tommy shakes his head.

"Or maybe once a few years ago," he admits, "but I wasn't really paying attention. Seemed boring."

"Okay. Well it's really important. I'll find a copy of it and we can go over it in the next few days, alright? I know you struggle in school. This should help."

Tommy bristles. Right, that's what this is about. Phil's going to expect him to have good grades, huh? His IEP is just going to be another way to make sure he milks the best grades he can get from Tommy.

He's not surprised. Already he's gathered that Phil wants to get rid of his adhd and expects perfect grades. It's looking more and more like he's ended up in another home who's looking for the picture perfect child. It shouldn't be long until Tommy shatters that illusion.

"Sure, whatever," Tommy agrees, voice rough in an attempt to shut down the conversation.

Phil gives him an odd look, but nods.

"Okay, that was it," he admits.

Tommy takes it as a dismissal and jumps from the table, stalking back up to his room.

On his way down the hall, Wilbur calls out to him. The voice surprises him, stopping him just long enough for Wilbur to perk up and decide he has Tommy attention.

"C'mon in," he calls through the open door. Tommy huffs but does so, standing awkwardly right inside Wilbur's room.

"Sit," Wilbur insists, gesturing to his bed.

Tommy frowns, but does as instructed.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Wilbur says, "I didn't mean- I know you might not think of us as brothers. Now or ever. I'd like you to be eventually. I wanted to apologize earlier though, I don't want you to think I'm mad or I expect that from you."

"What?" Tommy says.

"You don't have to be my brother," Wilbur says, "not if you don't want to."

"What?" Tommy repeats.

Wilbur frowns and tilts his head, the gesture looking similar to a parrot. When's the last time he's seen a parrot? One of his foster family's biological daughters had a pet parrot, but he's pretty sure a more recent home took him to the zoo once. He had to have seen a parrot there.

But that's not what they're talking about. He does his best to refocus.

"What the fuck," Tommy says, "What the fuck. What is this house?"

"Uh..." Wilbur says.

"Who the fuck- what- this doesn't make any fucking sense!" Tommy insists.

"What doesn't?" Wilbur asks.

"You! Phil! This! Why are- what's the endgame? What's the act?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Wilbur admits.

"People- people aren't just nice," Tommy insists, "people aren't nice for no reason. And so far all of you have been nice and I don't know what you want!"

Wilbur's face falls.

"Tommy," he whispers, "Tommy. We don't- we don't want anything. We just want you to be happy."

"Well I'm not!" Tommy shouts. "I'm not happy! I'm not happy and I don't understand this place!"

"Okay," Wilbur says, "okay. I'm sorry you're not happy. You- you should tell Phil that. But it's I guess- we want more than your happiness. We want- we want you to- to be in a place where life is good. Even when it's bad. And we want that place to be with us. So we're going to do our best to provide that, and if it doesn't work, you're allowed to leave."

Tommy stops, heart beating rapidly. He's never had this happen before.

Wilbur, Wilbur genuinely seems to care.

Is there a chance that this house could actually be different?

Chapter End Notes

This chapter means a lot to me tbh? cause it starts to show like the beginning of tommys relationship with the others and his dynamic in the house. plus now that the base scene has been set, we can get into more plot stuff! :D

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

encompass: the sandbox: encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

encompass: behind the scenes: an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

a list of firsts

Chapter Summary

Tommy has his first day of school, learns more about the family dynamics, and makes a friend. In that order. He thinks?

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: generally shittiness of foster care, mentions of homelessness, therapy, poor self-worth

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy's second morning doesn't have smoke, so he counts that as a win.

Then again, it does have school so maybe he'd take a kitchen fire and hope he goes down with it.

Alas, that's not his luck.

"What are you thinking about?" Phil asks, pulling Tommy from his daydream.

Tommy turns to look at him.

"School... I guess," he mutters.

Phil nods.

"How are you feeling about it?"

Tommy shrugs.

"Anything I can do to support you?"

Tommy scoffs.

"I'm not a baby. I don't know you to hold my hand."

"Okay. Well I'm here if you need me" Phil says, and drops it. Tommy is grateful for that fact.

He stares out of the window for the rest of the drive. At some point Phil says something about the front office and picking up papers or a schedule or... or whatever. Tommy zones out and doesn't care.

"Have a good day," Phil says. Tommy startles, looking around and realizing that they're already here. Had it already been ten minutes?

"Tommy?" Phil asks. Phil's voice kicks Tommy into gear and he grabs his new backpack with a few of his new school supplies along with a sack lunch that Phil's put together himself, all for him.

He opens the door and is out, closing it just as Phil says goodbye.

Tommy cringes at the timing, not having intentionally slammed the door in Phil's face. Hopefully Phil didn't notice.

Except c'mon, he definitely noticed, the goodbye being split almost exactly in half with the slam of a car door. Tommy can't help feel a bit bad, Phil hasn't been anything but nice.

So far.

The other shoe will drop.

He knows it will.

It always does.

But Tommy remembers his conversation with Wilbur last night and for the first time in eight houses he wonders 'will it?'

He pushes the thought away just as he pushes open the front door to the school office.

He stumbles his way in and is greeted with bright faces and bright smiles. He stutters through his explanation of being a new student and he's directed to someone else, who directs him to someone else, who directs him to someone else.

He finally ends up in front of his counsellor who he's already forgotten the name of with a few pamphlets he knows he'll throw away the minute he has the chance, a map that's over a decade old, and his schedule. He escapes as quickly as possible reassuring her that yes he can figure his way around and no he does not need her to get a student to lead him around like a lost puppy.

He's been to bigger schools.

How bad could it be?

Very bad is the answer because apparently this school's numbering system is shit.

#610 isn't next to, across from, or even near #609 and Tommy's quickly losing hope as the final kids trickle into classes.

Tommy is one of the only people not moving, absolutely lost and looking like a loser. He twists his hands and taps his leg on the ground, wondering what he should do when out of nowhere something rams into him, almost knocking him over. The other thing doesn't have as much luck, and goes tumbling onto the ground.

It's at that moment that Tommy realizes that the thing that ran into is actually a kid.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry!" the kid says from where he's sprawled on the floor.

Tommy shrugs and the kid scrambles to his feet.

"Seriously!" he says, "I'm- I just got put in a new class but I read the number wrong and went to the wrong class and so I had to race across campus to get here, I'm so sorry. Are you alright?"

Tommy nods, unusually quiet.

"Okay! Sorry again! I'll see you around!"

Seconds later and the kid disappears down the hall. Tommy resumes his search, chewing his lip as he wanders the halls, giving up on trying to follow numbers and instead checking every door he can find.

The bell rings and the last kids trickle to class or mill with others in tables near the outside of what Tommy thinks is the library.

It's about five minute after the bell when Tommy stumbles across room #610, which is apparently next to #620, and on the opposite side of the building as #609.

Tommy opens the door, causing every head to look at him as the teacher stops mid lecture.

Tommy's been here enough times that he should be used to it, but each time he lands himself at a new school it feels like the first time.

"Hi," he says.

"Can I help you?" the teacher asks, raising an eyebrow at him. Tommy can tell that he's certainly not impressed.

"I'm in this class?" he offers. "I'm new."

"Thomas?" the teacher asks. He nods.

"Take a seat," the teacher says, pointing at an open desk near the back. He carries on with whatever he was saying and the class slowly loses interest, allowing Tommy to make his way to his new spot.

Something moves out of the corner of his eyes and he looks up to see the kid who ran into him earlier giving him a furious wave.

The action catches a few kids' attention and they all turn to look at Tommy.

Unsure and hesitant, Tommy gives a small wave back.

The boys face beams into an incredible smile.

Tommy spends his first class keeping his head down, leg bouncing furiously under the desk. He remembers what Techno said about stimming, and looks around. He realizes that while other kids do bounce their legs or tap their fingers, none of them really make it a habit. On the other hand, Tommy's been sitting here doing the same motion for minutes.

Experimentally, he tries to stop. Thirty seconds in and he gives up.

He might have to look more into this whole stimming thing.

He plays so much with his bouncing leg that the class seems to fly by, a concept Tommy is very unfamiliar with in school. More familiarly, Tommy doesn't remember any part of the lecture. But the bell rings and a hoard of teenagers race for the door.

Tommy startles and grabs his own things, waiting for a few seconds and sticking to the back of the herd.

"Hi again!" a voice calls out, and Tommy turns to see ran-into-me boy. "I'm Tubbo! Nice to see you again!"

"Tubbo?" Tommy repeats.

The boy- Tubbo- nods.

"Yeah. Cause Toby's weird."

"Toby's weird?" Tommy says in absolute disbelief. What teenage boy goes by Tubbo over Toby and then claims that Toby is the weird name?

"Thomas, right?" Tubbo asks.

"Tommy," he grumbles.

"Okay, cool. Well I'll see you around Tommy, yeah?"

Tommy shrugs. Tubbo seems to take that as a sign of consent because he gives Tommy a large smile and a little wave before darting away, blending into the mass of students.

From there on, school is... pretty much school. It's never been interesting to begin with and Tubbo was by far the highlight. Which is disappointing if Tommy's being honest.

The highlight of his day was a kid with a weird name running into him.

God, school sucks.

But finally, finally the last bell rings, and Tommy escapes his last class to search for the location Wilbur had told him to meet.

Tommy knew it was a parking lot, but he's already come across three and he's not sure which one Wilbur's at.

He ends up trying each one out, getting lucky on the second when Wilbur spots him and waves over to catch his attention.

Tommy shoves his hands into his pockets and stalks over to him.

"Might be a minute," Wilbur tells him, "Techno usually tries to avoid the crowds."

Tommy nods, and takes a seat in the large cement planter that Wilbur has stationed himself at.

"How was your day?" he asks.

"Fine."

Wilbur nods.

"Do anything fun?"

"No."

"Oh. Okay then."

Tommy huffs and looks away. He doesn't really know why he's being an ass. Wilbur's been nothing but nice. It's the after school exhaustion catching up to him, he thinks. Tommy kind of wants to get back to the house.

It's weird.

He's- he wants to go back somewhere.

Luckily, the wait isn't long and Tommy doesn't have to flesh out those complicated thoughts because a pink-haired boy comes stumbling through the crowd, headphones going up over his ears.

"Hey Tech!" Wilbur greets, "how was-"

Techno hisses at Wilbur- literally hisses, seriously how often does he do that- and stalks past.

Wilbur takes a step back and frowns, looking after his younger brother. After a few moments, he seems to realize Techno isn't stopping and he races forward a few steps, long legs quickly catching up. Tommy pads after him.

Wilbur doesn't say anything else, just leads them to the car as they all pile in.

Techno takes the front seat, turning the music off with a click as he pulls his legs up to his chest and stares morosely out the window.

Tommy thinks he's being a bit dramatic, but god if that ain't a mood after his first day of school.

Wilbur seems unsure of what to do, as he continues to stay quiet and taps irregularly on the steering wheel.

He shifts occasionally in his seat, constantly looking like he wants to say something, but never doing so. He continuously checks the rearview mirror to look at Tommy.

Tommy chooses to ignore this.

Techno stays huddled up in a ball, staring out the window. At one point he starts to mutter to himself. Wilbur takes his hand off the wheel for a millisecond, reaching towards Techno as if to seemingly comfort him, before dropping it and returning it to the wheel.

The short ride is the quietest Tommy has ever heard Wilbur and Techno. Neither say a word outside of Techno's mumbling, and they both leap out the instant the car is off.

Techno opens the door first, marching through the house as Wilbur and Tommy follow.

"Hey Tech!" Phil greets as he enters, "How was your..." he trails off as Techno stomps off to his room, house quiet as a door slams in the distance. Phil raises an eyebrow at the behavior, but otherwise does nothing to interrupt or prevent it.

Within moments, Phil turns back to Wilbur and him.

"Wilbur, Tommy," he greets, "how was school?"

"Good," Wilbur says, "English quiz went well."

"Awesome," Phil praises, and turns to Tommy. "Tommy?"

"Fine."

"Anything good happen?" Phil probes.

"No."

"Okay. Well anything about your day you want to share?"

Tommy considers.

"A kid ran into me in the hall," he admits.

Phil's eyebrows crease as he frowns.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"Yeah," Tommy answers , choosing not to elaborate.

Silence hangs in the room. The three of them stand there, milling in the living room.

"Alright then," Phil says.

"I've got homework," Wilbur says, and then gives Phil a quick hug before leaving. Tommy watches him go. With Wilbur gone, Tommy's stuck alone with Phil.

"I, uh, me too," Tommy says. Because he thinks he has homework, right? So it's not a lie, even if he's definitely not planning on doing homework and instead planning on escaping Phil by any means necessary.

Phil gives him a nod and Tommy skitters away.

His room is slowly becoming his safe spot in the house. Tommy doesn't know what to think about it. He's never had a safe spot before. In past houses and group homes the closest things he had were nooks and crannies to hide valuables like food and his DS. Most rooms he shared and in quite a few houses the door had to stay open until he could be 'trusted,' whatever that meant. Tommy had never made it to the 'trusted' level in any of the past houses.

But this room, Tommy can't help but feel like is his.

Maybe it's because he can close the door, maybe it's because people ask permission to come in, maybe it's because he doesn't share it.

It's probably a mixture of all three.

All Tommy knows is that it's starting to feel safe, like home and he's not sure that's a good thing.

It's day three. It's day three and he's already starting to feel at home and he can't do that. He can't get attached this quickly, because it'll only make leaving harder.

He's only gotten this attached one another time. That was house one. he had been so sure that they loved him, wanted him that he missed all the signs of their growing annoyance with him. He hadn't made the same mistake since, and he isn't starting now.

He fucks around in his room for most of the afternoon, playing on his DS and opening one of the stim toys he got. The one he opens is the noodle-like one that Techno seemed fond of.

He learns that it's called a tangle and quickly grows fond of it. The sensation of twisting around his feelings is nice, providing small amounts of pressure before shifting and moving. He spends a good while just fiddling with it, surprised that a small piece of plastic can capture his attention for this long. Especially considering his attention span is historically worse than that of a goldfish.

He gets called to dinner, heads to bed, and wakes up the next morning to repeat the process.

The week starts to blend together, with Tommy waking up, going to school, going home, procrastinating on homework, and awkwardly interacting with his newest foster family.

But on Thursday, almost a week into his stay, the routine changes up.

At first Tommy doesn't notice. He hasn't memorized the drive yet, and even if he had he's prone to zoning out, so when Wilbur parks at a place that is very much not the house he's staying at, Tommy becomes immediately lost.

Where are they? Why are they here?

The uncertainty unsettles Tommy. He hates not knowing how to act.

Wilbur jumps out of the car, Techno quickly following. Tommy starts to unbuckle his own seatbelt and follows them both, before he notices Techno's wrapping around to the driver's seat and jumping right back in.

Wilbur says goodbye and marches off towards the buildings in front of them, disappearing around a corner. Techno backs the car up, and returns to the road.

"What, where's Wil going?" Tommy asks.

Techno shoots him a look.

"Oh right. You're here."

Tommy scowls at the statement, puffing up under the scrutiny.

"Yeah I am, big man," he insists.

"Wilbur has therapy on Thursdays," Techno explains, "Phil's still at work, so we switch off."

"Wilbur goes to therapy?" Tommy snorts.

He's been once or twice, mandatory check ins here or there.

"Yeah," Techno says, voice returning with a sharp edge, "yeah he does. Has Phil talked to you about it? Trying therapy?"

Tommy scoffs.

"I don't need fucking therapy," he insists. "I can handle shit."

"Therapy doesn't mean you can't handle things," Techno responds, "just means you're brave enough to accept help."

The phrase sounds awkward in Techno's mouth, unfamiliar, and Tommy knows straight away he's repeating something he's heard.

"That what Phil tells you?" Tommy asks. He doesn't know why he says it, the words blurt out of his mouth with no control. "Wraps you in a little cocoon and calls being a pussy 'brace.'"

Techno's hands clench around the steering wheel. His mouth tightens and for a second Tommy thinks he's hit Techno's breaking point. He wonders if he can get Techno to punch him. He seems the type.

But all Techno does is take a deep breath.

"Whatever you say, Tommy," Techno drawls, completely passing by him.

Tommy scowls and sits back in his seat. Whatever. He's used to being ignored.

Even so, he can't help the niggling of curiosity that grows in him at the fact that Wilbur goes to therapy. There's something about, the idea of it, that Tommy clings into.

Wilbur seems so normal as far as foster siblings go. Tommy doesn't get why he goes to therapy, especially when he returns home that day looking ten times more tired than when he had dropped himself off for his appointment.

Tommy even hears Wil softly crying in the hall later that night as he passes Tommy's door walking down the hall to Phil's room.

Why go if it makes things worse?

Whatever. Seems like a stupid thing anyways. What person couldn't handle their own feelings? Doesn't Wilbur know by now to either suck it up and get over it or bury it deep enough so he never has to deal with it?

After that, school starts to become a regular part of the day, and Tommy quickly slides into the routine. It's boring and horrible and Tommy hates every minute of sitting stiffly in a classroom.

Tommy's always hated school. He gets that most kids do, but Tommy feels like he's on a whole other level. He used to like school, used to try hard. But someone between the ages of seven and ten school became less about trying and encouragement and more about standards and competition and expectation.

Tommy had never been very good at meeting expectations. He quickly fell behind on assignments and failed to properly follow instructions. He could never sit down and study and wasn't able to sit still during tests. He zoned out in lectures and doodled on his notes.

Teachers would reprimand him, insisting that he could do better and even so, his grades continued to slip. It's not that Tommy didn't care about school... Well to be fair he doesn't care about school.

But the thing is, he stopped caring about school when school stopped caring about him.

That said the one good thing about school was that it provides structure and routine and Tommy's surprised by how much he's craving that.

For as chaotic of a child as he is, he's always enjoyed a routine. He's spent a lot of his time skipping around houses, districts, and schools. It's always a hassle to fit into a whole new

miniature culture each time, but once he does it's a small bit of stability. He doesn't have much of that, so he takes whatever he gets.

Either way, it's always a harsh adjustment.

The weekend arrives which means the first check up. Amelia shows up at the house and talks to Tommy privately for a bit and as much as Tommy wants to say that this house is just like the others and prove Amelia wrong, he can't.

So he says it's going okay and does his best to stay quiet for the rest of the talk.

But Amelia presses, and he reluctantly shares.

He tells her that every week, they apparently have 'family evening.' Tommy's not fond of the title. Phil gets all them together on Wednesday evenings and they gather in the living room to play games or watch a movie together. Tommy had experienced his first Wednesday family evening a few days ago.

It's a weird experience. Tommy's been in houses that have family bonding before, but it's never been like it is at Phil's.

He tells Amelia that Techno's pretty withdrawn and Wilbur's often busy with homework but they both joined the evening time without protest, instead with smiles. Most families Tommy's been a part of that have had family evenings always resent it to some degree. The kids never want to participate; the parents are annoyed at the lack of compliance.

Tommy doesn't know what's different, but it's not like that at Phil's.

For some reason that makes Amelia smile, and when she leaves she once again says she thinks this is the perfect fit for Tommy, like this placement is the perfect pair of socks or some shit. He looks down at his feet as she says that, studying his new shoes and the socks Wilbur had gotten for him. Neither set has holes.

From there one week turns to two turns to three turns to Tubbo approaching his desk in the one class they share together: European history.

"Hi," Tubbo greets, a grin permanently etched on his face.

"Hi," Tommy returns, much more gruffly. Tubbo doesn't seem to be phased.

"Want to be my partner?" he asks.

Tommy blinks at him, wondering what the hell he's on. He looks around the classroom and sees that all the other students are starting to congregate in pairs and that the whiteboard at the front of the classroom has a list of instructions under the heading 'Current Event Project.'

Tommy turns back to Tubbo.

"Sure. I guess." It's not like he has a better option.

"Cool! Can I give you my number and we can get in touch about what we want to do it on?"

"Uh..." what does Tommy say? Technically he has a phone now, and his own number but he's still not really sure if the rules around it. He has the same four numbers he started with and not a single more. He's not actually sure if he's allowed to text Tubbo.

Tubbo's face falls.

"Or uh, I can give you my email if you don't want to text."

"No! That's not what I meant," Tommy desperately inputs. He doesn't know exactly why but he doesn't want to make Tubbo upset. The kid has been nothing but kind for him even if he ran into him that first day. Tommy doesn't get why Tubbo wants to be his partner, but that also doesn't mean Tommy wants to be an asshole.

"I uh, I don't know if you can text you?" he admits. "Why don't- give me your number and I'll see?"

Tubbo frowns but nods, and writes his number out for Tommy. His handwriting is absolutely atrocious, but it's not like Tommy's is any better.

Tommy takes the flimsy bit of paper and shoves it in his pocket.

For the rest of the day his mind is on the small paper he carries with him. He's never been one to try and pay attention in school before, but it doesn't matter much because there's no way he'd be able to focus on anything else anyways. He pulls it out just to look at it a few times.

How is he going to bring this up to Phil?

He could say he has a group project. Phil's reasonable, he'd understand that. And he likes when Wilbur and Techno do good in school, so maybe he'll like that Tommy seems to be focused on school as well.

He'll say his partner wants to text about the project, that way it's on Tubbo, not him. If Phil doesn't like the idea he can't take it out on Tommy, and Tubbo won't get in trouble because he'd have no way of knowing Tommy isn't allowed to text people.

So he just needs-

"What are you thinking so hard about?" Wilbur asks, sliding into Tommy and gently bumping his shoulder.

Tommy jumps, not realizing Wilbur had arrived at their little meet up spot.

He looks up. Wilbur's not that much taller than him, but even though Tommy's young, he's used to being one of the tallest in whatever house he ends up at. But Wilbur has at least three inches on him. Wilbur keeps walking, Techno at his side, and Tommy falls into line with them.

Tommy considers sharing.

Wilbur and Techno are probably some of the best foster brothers Tommy's ever had. They're only downside is their loyalty to Phil. Tommy knows that if he fucks up, they'll certainly take Phil's side over his.

Besides that, they have a lot of advantages. They don't take his things or pick on him. They respect his area and don't try to intentionally rile him up or get him in trouble. Best of all, Tommy can ask them questions. So far they've only answered with kindness.

In new houses there's always new rules and the best foster siblings are the ones that help you learn them, understand them so you can stay out of trouble for as long as possible.

Most of the time, you're not that lucky and you land yourself with kids who understand supply and demand and realize that the supply of foster kids is a lot higher than the demand of adoptive families. And when there's a surplus, not every kid gets to stay. The older kids have the advantage by having the home court, of knowing the rules the best. It isn't uncommon for them to fuck you over.

Tommy's always wary at first because a foster sibling saying something works a certain way doesn't always mean their telling the truth, but so far everything Wilbur and Techno have told him has stood true.

It makes everything a lot easier.

"Can I- Do you think Phil will be okay with me texting someone for a school project?"

"Why wouldn't he be?" Techno asks.

Tommy shrugs.

"I dunno. Just wasn't sure I was allowed to text people."

Wilbur turns to look at him, pausing mid stride.

"You didn't think you could text people?" Wilbur asks.

"What? Not like I'd know. This house is weird as fuck," Tommy says as he avoid Wilbur's gaze.

"Course you can text people," Techno adds, "Rules with phones is that Phil doesn't give a shit s'long as you're being safe. You can lose your phone or privileges at any point if you do anything stupid. Otherwise he won't touch it."

"Like... what type of stupid things?" Tommy asks. Because Tommy, well he's done a lot of stupid things. If he's going to try texting Tubbo he'd at least like to know where the range is and how far he can push it before losing privileges.

"Depends," Techno says.

Wow. That's helpful.

Wilbur snorts at Techno's short answer.

"I lost some privacy privileges for a few months when I first joined Techno and Phil. Tried to run away a few times, so Phil set up a tracker thing on my phone. He told me about it and everything, but yeah. He let me take it off when I stopped running away."

"You tried to run away?" Tommy asks. His heart spikes. Running away is never a good sign. Kids- well they only run away when things are really bad.

Tommy's thought about it before, even packed a bag. But he knows that however bad things have gotten at any home, they were still better than the streets. Going without food for a night was better than going without food for a week. Clothes with holes were better than unwashed clothes with holes.

"Yeah," Wilbur admits.

"Why?"

Wilbur laughs. Tommy tenses at the noise, wondering how this is something he could laugh about. What had caused him to run? What had happened?

Phil was too good to be true, wasn't he?

Tommy fucking knew it.

"That's a good question," he admits, "I don't really know. Or like, it seems stupid now. I was scared and hurting mostly. I didn't want a new family and I was scared to get attached."

That's- well that's not what Tommy was expecting to say the least. He had known a few kids that had run just for the hell of it, so maybe Wilbur was one of those. Tommy's never understood it, kids who run just to be caught.

"But... you like it here?" Tommy cautions, needing confirmation.

"Yeah, I do" Wilbur agrees, "And that was part of the scary bit. I lost my family when I was 13. I still remember them. I didn't want someone replacing that. Phil and Tech were great, and that was scary because for the first time in two years I wanted to actually stay somewhere. But it felt like I was betraying my family."

Tommy's never really had family. He remembers his parents, sure, but he's detached from them at this point. Nothing but a faint memory in his life. He doesn't ache for them. And- even if foster care sucks ass- it's better than when he was with them. He doesn't get Wilbur's attachment.

But he does get wanting to stay somewhere, and he gets how scary that is.

He thinks- he thinks he might want to stay with Phil, Techno, and Wilbur. But that's never going to happen, so he needs to get over himself.

"So I can text Tubbo?" he ventures.

Wilbur laughs.

"Yeah kid, you can text Tubbo. Honestly Phil'll probably be ecstatic that you made a friend."

"He's not my friend," Tommy mutters, "We're just working on a project together."

"Alright then."

With the permission granted, Tommy slips out the small piece of paper from his pocket and pulls his phone out of the other. He opens up his texts, the page only half full with the few short conversations he's had.

He types in Tubbo's number and sends a quick message.

Tommy: *hi this is tommy i can text*

Tubbo: *hi tommy!!! its tubbo :D*

The smiley at the end is the stupidest, dorkiest expression Tommy's yet to receive over text, but it alights his heart with fondness anyways. He smiles at his phone, gripping it close.

Tommy still hates school but he thinks this project might not be as bad.

And it's not. He gets to know Tubbo over their research of recent events and Tommy finds himself actually doing the work, worried that he'll let Tubbo down.

He doesn't want to let Tubbo down. He's not sure why he cares so much, but he does.

Even so, as always, he starts to fall behind.

He admits that shamefully to Tubbo one day, who immediately shrugs it off.

"That's okay," he says, "we have some extra time, so we'll be okay."

"What do you mean?" Tommy asks, "Was the deadline extended?"

"No?" Tubbo says, "I uh.. I thought I would you. I have accommodations in school cause im dyslexic so we get some extra time."

"That's a thing?" Tommy asks.

"Yeah," Tubbo agrees, "it's called an IEP. Cause it's not exactly fair to expect me to do what everyone else does in the same amount of time when I'm at a disadvantage. It levels the playing field, y'know?"

Tommy perks up at the words 'IEP.'

"That's what an IEP's for?" Tommy asks.

"I mean it depends on why you have one," Tubbo says, shrugging as he continues typing.

Tommy looks back at his own paper, and considers his own IEP. He wishes he had more time like Tubbo. Tommy loses focus so easily and falls behind, maybe extra time would help him with the abundance of late work he's known for collecting.

But whatever, Tommy's used to not getting the support he needs.

Chapter End Notes

finally we have tubbo lmao. we'll def see more of our fav bee boi.

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

[encompass: the sandbox](#): encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

[encompass: behind the scenes](#): an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

honeymoon period

Chapter Summary

Tommy's been at this new month for about a month now. The honeymoon period is about to be up.

Chapter Notes

CW: ableism, generally shittiness of the foster system, self-doubt, discussion of auditory hallucinations

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Because of that project, Tommy and Tubbo start talking regularly. Turns out, even though Tommy denied it, Tubbo had somehow become his friend.

It was mostly Tubbo's doing, if Tommy's being honest. It had started with the group project and from there Tubbo followed him to lunch one day.

Tommy raised an eyebrow as Tubbo sat across from him on the grass.

"Hey!" Tubbo says, "can I sit with you?"

Tommy stares, hesitating for a minute as he considers. Making friends never works out because he gets attached and then he gets kicked out again, never to see them again. But Tubbo looks so hopeful, Tommy hates to crush his spirits.

"What about your friends?" Tommy asks, hoping to redirect him.

"Oh. I don't really have friends," Tubbo admits.

Tommy stares more.

"You don't have friends?" he gapes.

Tubbo shifts, and looks down and a second too late Tommy realizes what he said and how it sounds.

"Well you don't have to say it like that," Tubbo says softly.

"No, no!" Tommy says, instantly feeling horrible, "no I meant. You're like super nice. I just- I thought- you seem like the type of person people would want to be friends with."

What Tommy doesn't say is that Tubbo's exactly the kind of person he wants to be friends with.

Tubbo shrugs, "I cry a lot. And I'm not very smart. I like computers and video games too much. I make too many dick jokes and break a lot of rules. So..."

"I break a lot of rules too," Tommy admits, "I don't mean to but somehow I always find a way."

Tubbo gives him a funny look and Tommy offers a shy smile, becoming braver when he receives one in turn.

Well, Tommy can do enough rule breaking for the both of them, even if it's never intentional. Knowing his track record, it's bound to happen.

He enjoys his time with Tubbo and quickly finds his first thoughts about the boy completely wrong. Or well, not completely. He is genuine, and nice, but he's also incredibly talented with instruments and tells horribly crude jokes.

When Tommy finds out his favorite show is South Park of all things, he's surprised. When Tubbo shares the fact that he dreams about being experimented on by Soviet Russia, Tommy is less surprised.

What a weird fucking guy. Tommy thinks he's found the best person ever.

Tubbo becomes one of the main things in his life. Currently, his life revolves around school, Tubbo, foster home.

And speaking of his foster home, a full month passes and nothing goes wrong. The fourth week sets Tommy on edge, certain that enough time has passed to let him settle in and that Phil will start to show his true colors soon enough.

Tommy's been through this before, the new house is extra nice to him for the first few weeks, welcoming the addition. But the moment he gets settled in, they change, reverting back to how they really are. The honeymoon period of having a new kid living with you has never lasted longer than a month, but the first day of the fifth week arrives and nothing about Phil, Techno, or Wilbur has changed.

It's fucking with Tommy's mind.

One night, he's pretty sure the breaking point has been hit. It's 'family evening-' the title of which Tommy still hates- and Wilbur is nowhere to be found.

Techno and Tommy have both already found seats in the living room, Techno sprawled out across the entirety of the couch with a book and Tommy curled up in an armchair.

Phil enters the room, setting down a bowl of popcorn on the table and looking back and forth at the two of them, noticing the distinct lack of a third child.

“Where’s Wil?” Phil asks.

Tommy shrugs, observing carefully. No one’s broken family evening before, but it’s obviously an important routine to the family, and he doesn’t know what to expect from them now that Wil’s absent. How will Phil react?

Phil’s eyes soften at his shrug, and he peers at Tommy for a moment. Tommy looks down at his hands, which are playing with his fidget cube he got a month ago.

“Tech?” Phil asks, moving on.

“I don’t know,” Tech says, voice thick, “He’s supposed to be here.” Techno clenches his fists tight enough that Tommy can see how pale they turn from his own spot across the room.

The phrasing catches Tommy’s attention, the pressure to attend.

“Yeah, he is,” Phil agrees, “You alright?”

Tommy blinks and scrunches his nose, risking a glance at Techno. He’s not sure why Phil asked the question, but as Tommy studies him, he can tell how Techno is oddly tense. At first sight he appears relaxed, stretched out on the couch, but now that it’s been called to his attention, Tommy can see the tense muscles and the strain in Techno’s jaw. His knuckles turn white on the grip on his book.

Tommy’s heart begins to beat a little faster, and he starts to think of ideas to get him out of the situation.

“Yeah,” Techno practically growls, “It’s fine.”

Tommy wants to say it’s a lie, but he’s not willing to risk calling Techno out when he looks more than willing to deck him.

Phil nods.

“I’m going to check on Wilbur,” Phil says. He turns and leaves the room, heading up the stairs to Wilbur’s room.

Tommy watches carefully, trying to figure how this will go down. Will Phil force Wilbur to join them? Tommy has been in family’s like that before, that forced kids to spend time as a family. Tommy quickly learned that it bred resentment, and those houses tended to have the most screaming, even if things seemed perfect on the outside.

Tommy waits, tense. Techno spares an odd glance at one point, before returning to his book, heads clenching it tightly instead. Tommy curls tighter in his chair.

A few minutes later Phil returns back downstairs without Wil.

Tommy breathes a sigh of relief, grateful for the lack of loud fighting.

“Wilbur’s not going to join us tonight,” Phil says as he rejoins them.

Techno swings his legs off the couch, sitting up straight and tense.

“He isn’t?” he asks, eyes wide.

“No,” Phil says gently, and he takes the spot where Techno’s feet used to be.

““Oh,” Techno says, “Oh. Okay.”

Tommy watches the interaction, feels the energy zap through the air. Something’s going on, but he doesn’t understand what and he hates not knowing, but it’s not worth the risk of asking.

Either way, Techno settles and they start the movie.

Tommy gets lost in it, distracting him from his worries. He’s not really following it at all, and he probably couldn’t explain the plot, but it’s enough to pull his attention away and relax.

They’re most of the way through when footsteps echo on the staircase. Tommy turns to see Wilbur coming down and Phil pauses the movie.

“Joining us?” Phil asks, and Wil nods.

He looks exhausted. He stumbles down the last few steps and flops onto the couch that Techno and Phil are on, immediately curling into Phil’s side. It’s more than a little crowded, but none of them seem to care.

Wilbur’s a fair few inches taller than the older man, but he curls up and tucks his head onto Phil’s shoulder. Phil wraps his arms around him, pulling him close and he presses play. Tommy watches him whisper something to Wil, causing the boy to burrow his head further into Phil’s body. A second later and the bright lights of the screen grab Tommy’s attention, pulling him away from the intimate interaction.

When the movie wraps up and they’re all slowly getting to bed, Wilbur finally speaks up.

"Why didn't they, y'know, just eat the sand?"

"What?" Techno asks.

Wilbur waves a hand loosely at the screen, "They were hungry," he insists, "could've had sand. It's a good treat. Nice to crunch on."

"Wilbur, are you telling me you eat sand?" Phil asks, an amused smile twitch on his face.

"Mmm, they're like pretzels," Wilbur mutters, "makes me not have long hamster teeth."

"Okay and with that it's time for bed," Phil decides, gently forcing Wilbur to his feet and pushing him towards the stairs.

Tommy watches, dumbfounded, and slowly follows Wilbur who's on to more sand mutterings.

This is the night things should have changed, the night that Phil finally showed his true colors. Now that a month's up, they should've dropped the act.

They haven't.

Tommy doesn't get it.

"What's up?" Tubbo asks, sitting across from him on the school's grass as Tommy viciously bites into some carrots.

"What's gotten into you?"

It's week five, Tommy wants to say, It's week five and nothing's changed and nothing makes sense anymore.

"Nothing," Tommy hisses, "You wouldn't get it."

"Oh," Tubbo says with a frown, lowering his gaze. Great, now Tommy's upset Tubbo. He hates upsetting Tubbo.

"Sorry," Tommy says, "I didn't mean to be rude."

"It's okay," Tubbo offers with a shrug, "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"No it's just-" Tommy cuts himself off with a sigh, "I just don't understand."

"Understand what?" Tubbo says, "Cause the whole parliament thing doesn't make any sense to me either. Like what the hell does-"

"What? No," Tommy says, cutting Tubbo off, "No. I was talking about- uh- home." And boy does that word leave a bitter taste on his tongue.

"Oh," Tubbo says again, "Oh. Is it your parents or something?"

"Fuck no!" Tommy yelps, because the last thing he wants to be doing is thinking of Phil as a sort of father figure. "Hell fucking no."

Tubbo pulls back.

"Um, okay then."

Tubbo- Tubbo's cool. He's alright. Or whatever. Tommy can trust him, yeah?

"I uh, it's been one month," he admits.

Tubbo brightens, “Right!”

Wait, Tubbo knows? How does Tubbo know?

“Right your first day was a month ago! I ran into you. What about it? Oh, new school, did you move or something? Has it been a month since you moved?” Tubbo asks, innocent as a fucking newborn.

“Yeah,” Tommy admits. He takes a bite of his carrots, dragging the process out, “Yeah. I moved into my new foster family just over a month ago.”

Tommy stiffens, and prepares for the fallout.

“Oh,” Tubbo says, like he always does. And then, “Oh.”

Yup. There it is.

“Okay. Well uh, how is it? What- What do you not understand?” Tubbo asks, and Tommy’s relieved that he doesn’t instantly hound him with questions.

“It’s alright, I guess,” Tommy struggles to admit, “But it’s- nothing’s changed.”

“And... that’s a bad thing?” Tubbo tests.

“Yes,” Tommy answers, “no. I don’t know. Things always change after a month. People act differently. But that hasn’t happened yet.”

Tubbo frowns.

“What do you mean?”

God, Tubbo’s so fucking sheltered.

“People, people act certain ways for certain reasons,” he tries to explain. “The first month, the family’s always really nice, right? Doing things for you, welcoming you, all about you. But after the first month you’re not the new kid anymore. You’ve been there for awhile. So the family starts to loosen up, relax and act like they really do. They’re not as lenient and don’t put up with as much. And that’s when I get in trouble. But it’s been a month and I haven’t gotten in trouble.”

“Well... Did you do anything to get into trouble?”

“No,” Tommy admits, “Or well, I don’t think so. But I never think I do something that’ll get me in trouble and then I get in trouble anyways.”

Tubbo's eyebrows come to scrunch up in that way that Tommy has begun to recognize means that he's confused about something. It happens the most when he's working on English homework, thinking about tax evasion, trying to figure out why half the schools rules exist (especially the dress code), and now, apparently talking to Tommy.

“Okay. Well, maybe they agree with you. Maybe they know you didn’t do anything to get into trouble, so you’re not in trouble.”

Tubbo lays it out so simply. By now Tommy knows he isn't as naïve as he seems, but god does it look like he was born yesterday.

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Tommy emphasizes.

“Why not?” Tubbo asks, eyebrows creasing with effort and frown etched across his face.

“Cause I always get in trouble,” Tommy insists. Tubbo tilts his head and gives Tommy a look, not responding. “Whatever,” Tommy huffs, “Told you you wouldn’t get.”

He goes back to chewing his carrots viciously, finishing his lunch in silence.

The worst part of his conversation with Tubbo is that Tommy can’t stop thinking about it.

He thinks about it at dinner while Phil cooks and Techno, Wil, and him set the table in unison. He thinks about it when Wilbur beckons him into his room and pulls out his guitar. Tommy flops on the open beanbag, and a minute later Techno joins them, stealing Wilbur’s bed as they listen to the oldest boy sing and play guitar. He thinks about it when he asks Phil if he can spend the afternoon at Tubbo's and Phils’ face splits into a blinding smile.

He continues to think about it when Techno knocks on his door one day and calls inside.

“Tommy?”

“Come in,” he calls back.

Techno opens the door, his hair up and wearing athletic clothes. He hesitates, shifting from one foot to the other and twisting his hands in front of him.

“I’m going running,” he says.

“Okay,” Tommy says in turn. Techno goes on runs almost every day, it makes sense. The weird thing is Techno telling him. He’s never bothered to come up to Tommy’s room to tell him he’s going for a run, and why would he?

“Do you- would you like to join me?” he asks.

“Why?” Tommy blurts out without thinking. It’s the first thing that pops into his head. Why is Techno inviting him to go running with him out of the blue, randomly. Why now? What’s the purpose of this.

It’s not until he sees Techno’s face fall that he considers how his question may have appeared.

Tommy didn’t- he didn’t mean to make Techno upset. He’s just confused.

Techno’s not exactly a social person. Kind? Sure. Smart? Hell yeah. But social? He’s not that. He’s also a person driven by routine, and his runs are a part of that. Techno runs by himself

and that's part of his routine. And he doesn't change his routines. So why is he inviting Tommy?

Why is he inviting Tommy when Tommy knows that the runs are a way Techno decompresses, gets away from the stress of the world. It's his quiet place, his time to think, to breathe.

Why on earth is he inviting Tommy?

Tommy isn't sure why, but he knows that it means a lot to Techno, and he's not about to ruin that.

"I uh, I mean sure," Tommy says. Techno's face brightens slightly.

"You sure?" he asks.

"Yeah," Tommy validates, and a grin slips through Techno's stoic features.

"Meet me downstairs in five," he says, and then retreats. Tommy watches him go and then rushes to get ready.

He meets Techno, and they head off at a slow jog. Tommy hasn't explored the area much, and he isn't familiar with the route, so on each turn he stumbles slightly, faltering and unsure.

Techno catches onto his hesitance, calling out turns early and pointing out different areas. He shows Tommy how one of the side streets in their neighborhood connects to the running paths of a nearby park, a shortcut instead of looping around the neighborhood to the park's entrance.

It's also the way with less people. Tommy's learning that Techno's not a huge fan of others. He's kind, sure, but again, not a social person.

"How are things going?" he gruffly asks at one point, "How's it here?"

Tommy's starting to feel the run a little bit, his breathing becoming slightly harder and sweat starting to form across his body.

"Fine," Tommy allows, "I guess."

Techno says nothing, and they continue to jog.

"I hear voices, y'know," he says abruptly as they round a turn.

"What?" Tommy barks out in a laugh, trying to breathe deep and even as he talks.

"I hear voices," Techno repeats, "It's uh- I mean I think you'll be staying. I hope you'll be staying. So I thought you should know."

Holy shit is Techno serious? What is this fucking family? He's got to be pulling Tommy's leg or some shit, seeing how much he's willing to put up with.

“Voices,” Tommy says dubiously.

“Uh huh,” Techno agrees, “lots of times it's just annoying. Mutterings and distractions, y'know?”

Tommy absolutely does not know. What the fuck.

“Sometimes it's worse though,” Techno admits, “The voices can kinda be-” Techno shrugs mid-run and carries on in silence.

As Tommy breathes slightly labored breaths, he considers what Techno just said. He seemed so nonchalant, so casual. And yet, Tommy can see how he's more tense than before, how his running is less fluid, his strides stiff.

“You're serious,” he realizes.

“Yeah,” Techno agrees, glancing at him quickly.

“Oh,” Tommy says, wondering what the fuck just happened, “Oh. Okay.”

The rest of the run they spend mostly in silence, the only noises coming from crunching shoes on the path and the sounds of their labored breathing.

When they return to the house, Tommy's panting and extremely sweating. Techno's fairing a lot better, but still out of breath himself. Techno forces him to stretch out, explaining the importance of taking care of his body after running. Tommy rolls his eyes, but complies.

It's only after the run that he realizes that he enjoyed it. Tommy always liked running in gym class, but hadn't really done it elsewhere, and it's surprisingly relaxing. He can understand why it's something that Techno uses to relax, to detox.

“Hey Tech,” Tommy says nervously as he considers.

Techno turns to him.

“Yeah?” he asks.

Tommy thinks, he thinks about this being past the first month, about Techno sharing not only the run with him, but also the voices, and then of Tommy's own enjoyment.

“Do you- Do you think I could join you running again sometime?”

Techno grins at him.

“Yeah sure, why not,” he says. He then puts his larger hand on Tommy's head, ruffling his sweaty hair. “Now go take a shower. You stink.”

At the action, something inside Tommy clicks, and he's left staring after Techno as he trudged to the shower near his own room. Belatedly, he realizes he's still standing in the doorway, and stumbles forward towards his own room, head feeling like it's full of cotton.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't planning on posting this as soon as I did but my friend wanted the next chapter, so you can thank them. Also I may or may not have added like two chapters too this but we don't talk about that until I fully edit it.

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

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beginning of belonging

Chapter Summary

Tommy's sliding into place, building a strong friendship with Tubbo and slowly relearning past truths, beginning to understand that he can be exactly who he truly is. He's getting there. Slowly, very slowly.

Chapter Notes

CW: ableism, Tommy being a bit of a dick to Tubbo before apologizing, self-worth issues, school stress/grades

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He continues to think about the possibility of this house being different, if things actually working out.

He thinks about it as his name gets put on the chore rotation chart and on the movie night list. He thinks about it as Phil asks him to consider his own boundaries, triggers, and rules to add to the house.

Each day he feels himself settling in more, becoming increasingly comfortable with his temporary home. Because that's what this is, temporary. Even if it is different.

"I don't get why you always insist that," Tubbo admits.

Tommy scowls, "I told you, I never end up staying."

"I get that," Tubbo says, "but you said this family is different. And that they want to adopt you."

"Different doesn't mean they're going to keep me, Tubbo," Tommy scoffs, "You just don't get it."

Tommy expects Tubbo to drop it. He's definitely the quieter of the two and does little to challenge Tommy when he makes a decision.

"Yeah, I don't get it," Tubbo agrees, standing firm, "I don't get it because there's evidence showing that this family really does care about you and you're ignoring it because you're afraid."

Tommy bristles and a worm of doubt wriggles in his chest.

"I'm not afraid," he protests, "I'm a Big Man!"

Tubbo raises an eyebrow at him.

"You're not afraid?"

"No!"

"Okay, so you're not afraid that they're going to give you back like every other family has? That they're not going to be different? That they're not going to love you?"

"Tubbo, I already told you that's what always happens," Tommy scoffs, "God, do you even listen?"

Tubbo glares at him, and Tommy thinks that it's the first time he's seen Tubbo even somewhat show the emotion of anger.

He huffs, and goes back to his lunch.

Tommy should leave it, he knows he should. He wishes his mouth could take a hint.

"Y'know, no one really wants you either," Tommy points out, "I'm your only friend."

Tubbo freezes, breath hitching. He's completely paused for a moment before he slowly and methodically packs his lunch.

When he's done, he stands and Tommy catches sight of the glittering liquid at the corner of Tubbo's eyes. His heart drops.

"Yeah," Tubbo says, "some friend you are."

He turns and marches away, leaving Tommy alone with his carrots.

Tubbo's absence leaves a sick feeling in Tommy's stomach and he pays even less attention than normal in his remaining classes for the day. He finds himself trembling slightly in his last class of the day as he recognizes how rude he was to Tubbo.

Worst case scenarios race through his head and he's certain Tubbo isn't going to want to be his friend anymore. It's all he can think about the rest of the day and it'll only get worse when he checks his phone after dinner to find a text waiting for him.

Tubbo: *can we talk?*

Tommy's fucked up. His hands shake as he types in his answer.

Tommy: *sure*

He tries for casual, and hopes Tubbo doesn't realize how much he's panicking.

Tubbo: *im sorry abt today*

Tommy blinks at the quick reply and types back just as fast. But he doesn't really know what he's saying and so he deletes the mishmash of words and let's the cursor blink back at him, message unsent.

Tubbo: *ur rite. idk what it's like. i shudn't of pushed u*

The texts only make the sinking feeling in Tommy's chest worse. He feels like shit. He was an ass to Tubbo and here he is, apologizing to Tommy. It's not right. Tommy should be the one apologizing.

He's not sure why he hasn't.

Maybe it's because apologizing is scary, because apologizing means that he's admitting he was wrong. And Tommy- well when Tommy's wrong he usually gets hurt. He doesn't want to get hurt.

But Tubbo's so kind and Tommy doesn't want him getting hurt either. He takes a risk.

Tommy: *im sry too. I got defensive and was a jerk. i shouldn't have said that shit. i really didn't mean to hurt u*

Tubbo: *that's okay. Just don't do it again. Forgiven?*

Tommy: *I won't. forgiven*

Tubbo:

*()
:(III)-
()*

Tommy: *is that.. is that a bee??*

Tubbo: *yes! He's my best freind!*

Tubbo: *not counting u of corse*

Something about the interaction makes Tommy smile, the painful feeling in his chest turning more pleasant. It feels like there's a mini sun inside of him, heating him up from the inside out.

Tubbo's the first person he's cared about this much in a long time. It's scary, but it's also nice.

It's weird spending this much time with people.

Not only is there Tubbo, but there's also Phil, Techno, and Wilbur, who always seem to want to do things as a family.

Tommy's been in family's like that before, but the weird thing is that they genuinely seem to enjoy spending time together and never pressure him to join.

Tommy doesn't join a lot of the time.

But one weekend, Phil invites him along to a museum techno wanted to go in, and not much later Tommy finds himself shuffling through large doors, staring up at a high ceiling.

Phil buys tickets for Wilbur and himself. Tommy gets in free because apparently Techno has a pass and with each pass you can bring a child in with you.

Tommy scowls at the working, but doesn't argue. He's glad it doesn't cost anything, he'd feel guilty if Phil spent money on him for something he's not that interested in.

Because really, he isn't that interested in museums. They're stuffy and boring and way too quiet. Tommy has to act all proper and hasn't been allowed to stim and overall they're a shit experience.

He's not even sure why he said yes to this.

But he's here now, so he follows the group as Techno leads them in one direction, doing toe bounces and hand flaps at his side as he rambles endlessly.

Tommy shoves his hands in his pockets and scowls. To his luck, he finds an infinity cube in it, and he pulls it out, flipping it and enjoying the weight of the movement.

Eventually, they arrive at the entrance to a particular exhibit, and Techno shakes his head and makes a noise, pink hair flying in the air. Tommy used to seeing it up or pulled back either in a bun, loose braid, or ponytail, so it's a bit strange to see it flying free.

Without hesitation, Techno charges forward. Wilbur goes with him, grinning as he watches his brother, and Phil follows when he sees Tommy shuffle forward as well.

Before continuing, Tommy takes a glance at the exhibit's name.

'Life of the Ancient Greeks.'

That sounds fucking boring. But to be fair, it could be a lot worse. At least the Greeks had some cool gods and shit right? And the Colosseum stuff? Or was that something else?

Tommy doesn't care enough to know.

But the exhibit is much less interesting then he had hoped. Instead of cool weapons and hero stuff it's covered in baskets and clothing, particularly mundane and ordinary items.

Ahead, Tommy can see techno pointing out a detail in some weird gown to Wilbur, explaining what the linen symbolizes or some shit. God what a nerd.

Phil catches his look and joins him at his side.

"If you're not enjoying it, you can look around," he offers. "There's other exhibits, a garden, a café, and a gift store."

"Anything better than this boring hell?" Tommy crumbles.

Phil's face drops, and a frown etched across his face.

"You don't have to find it interesting," Phil says carefully, "But that doesn't mean you should be rude about it. Some people find this stuff very neat."

"Like Techno?" Tommy asks.

"Like Techno," Phil agrees, "Ancient Greece is one of his special interests. So is historical fashion."

"What's that?"

"Hmm?"

"A special interest."

"It's an autism thing. It's an overwhelming intense passion or fixation about a particular subject. Techno can tell you more about it. There's a similar adhd thing called hyperfixations."

God these conversations always had to go back to Tommy's stupid fucking adhd, didn't they? Doesn't Phil realize that if he could get rid of it, he would? He doesn't exactly enjoy it.

"Do you have any hyperfixations?" Phil asks.

"No," Tommy snorts, "I'm gonna go find something else to look at."

"Okay," Phil says, "text me if you need anything, I'll let you know when we're done."

Tommy gives a quick nod and ducks away.

He begins by wandering a few halls, quickly becoming trapped in some sort of weird rug exhibit that's attached to the one Techno's fawning over. He finds a set of stairs and escapes that way, going back to the ground floor.

He wanders a bit more, finding the opening to another exhibit. 'Gaming through the Ages' it's called. Well at least it's better than fucking Greece.

He walks loosely around the area, briefly reading three or four words from plaque's as he looks over old games. He hopes that the rest of them don't take that long. Most of these games were made before he was born, and all of them look boring.

That is, until Tommy sees the Pokémon wall.

His mouth falls open at the sight of it. The wall is tall and lengthy, stretching across the room. Be has just entered. Across the entire thing is a splattering of Pokémon from all generations in their different poses.

He finds himself drawn to it, and challenges himself to name all he can.

Snivy, Haunter, Jigglypuff, Talonflame, Chimchar, Mankey, and so many more.

There's a TV playing some of the episodes from the original series and display cases with all the games laid out. Tommy studies one of them, trying to see if he can spot the one he owns.

And yup, there it is, one of the oldest. It's not exactly like Tommy had the money to buy any of the newer games or consoles.

He flits from display to display, often finding himself back at the wall, naming every Pokémon that he sees. He still hasn't found one that's stumped him, but the wall's absolutely covered. Chances are, he doesn't know at least one.

"Pokémon, huh?" Wilbur asks.

Tommy jumps, whirling around to face his taller foster brother.

"Holy shit," he hisses, "Don't sneak up on me like that."

Wilbur gives him a sheepish smile.

"Sorry," he mutters.

"How's you find me?" Tommy asks. He couldn't have been here that long.

"You've been gone for like an hour," Wil says, "Thought I'd go looking. Tech's infodumping to Phil about some lace and I wondered what you got up to."

"An hour?" Tommy asks. There's no way he could have been looking at Pokémon for an hour. This section of the exhibit wasn't even that big!

"Yeah," Wilbur confirms. "So you like Pokémon?"

Tommy shuts down.

The answer is yes, he does like Pokémon. But the last time he told someone he liked Pokémon they called him a nerd. Which wasn't that bad. But the time before that someone asked if he had seen the show and Tommy went on a rant about how many shows and movies there actually were and they had walked away, bored.

Before that he had been asked what he liked about Pokémon and he had jumped and his volume rose as he spoke about types and the land and everything else until they told him to stop talking and said no one found it interesting.

Tommy likes Pokémon, but that doesn't matter because no one else likes to hear Tommy talk about Pokémon.

"I guess," he offers, trying to tone down the buzzing excitement just beneath his skin. If he lets too much show, then Wilbur will probably ask him more. And even though Tommy knows that talking about Pokémon never ends well for him, he can never seem to stop himself when prompted.

"What's your favorite one?" Wilbur asks.

Tommy scoffs.

"You can't pick just one," he protests.

Wilbur raises his eyebrows at him, a gentle smirk settling in his face.

"No?" he asks.

"No," Tommy confirms, "There's too many. And some of the cards are different then the video games which are different then the show. It depends."

"Okay, fair enough," Wilbur says, "but if you had to choose a favorite."

He can't choose a favorite. It's not that simple.

"Simisear," Tommy answers immediately.

"Yeah?" Wilbur asks, "What's that?"

Tommy tells himself not to go on a rant. Wilbur doesn't want to hear him talk about Pokémon for that long. He's probably only asking to be nice.

"Fire monkey," he says quickly, and leaves it at that. But Simisear is so much more than that. "Also in 2016 it was voted the least liked out of almost 800 Pokémon," he blurts out before he can stop himself.

"Really?" Wilbur asks, "Tell me about it."

And Tommy's trying not to talk about it, he is, but Wilbur keeps pushing and he wants to. So, even though he knows there's most likely the chance that he'll get in trouble for it after, Tommy opens the floodgates, and starts repeating every fact as well as the opinion he has about Pokémon.

The weird thing is that Wilbur seems to listen. He nods along, and when Tommy slows down he asks questions about what he was talking about. Tommy eagerly answers each one, catching himself bouncing on his toes a bit. He couldn't stop if he tried, but Wilbur doesn't even seem to want him to.

Eventually his rant fades, and Wilbur's questions slow and something that had been tight in Tommy's chest for a very long time unwinds. He takes a breath of fresh air and lets his body

relax like never before.

Wilbur smiles at him, and says it's awesome how much he knows about Pokémon and never complains that Tommy's talking too much. And when they finally meet back up with Techno and Phil, Wilbur proudly tells them about Tommy's love for Pokémon, and how knowledgeable he is on the subject.

Tommy preens a bit at the praise. It's quite unfamiliar being praised for something that he's usually ashamed about.

He's surprised how flexible this house seems to be. They're adapting and accommodating to his needs.

And now that he thinks about that, this may as well be as good as any time to bring it up.

"Hey, Wilbur?" Tommy approaches carefully.

"Hmm?"

"Do you remember like two weeks ago when you didn't come down to movie night?"

"Hm? Movie- oh family night? Yeah sorry about that. I had a lot of homework."

Tommy frowns. Wilbur's always been busy with school and he definitely seems dedicated if his grades are anything to go by, but Tommy's seen him take breaks before.

But he's not about to argue with Wilbur over it.

"Oh okay."

Wilbur must catch something in his tone, because he gives Tommy a bit of a side look and quickly tacks on to his short reply.

"It's my final year, y'know? Lots of work, prepping for university and stuff."

Tommy gives a small nod. That makes sense... he guesses.

"Right," he agrees.

Wilbur hums and looks away.

"So if Simisear is your favorite Pokémon, what do you think mine would be?"

Tommy immediately jumps into more explanation of Pokémon, looking for one that would fit Wilbur perfectly. Wilbur, once again, listens all the while, letting Tommy ramble to his heart's content.

Maybe... maybe this house could be different. Maybe... maybe Tommy really does belong here.

Those are the exact thoughts that stay with him when month three hits and Amelia stands at the door.

"Is it alright if I take Tommy out for lunch?" she asks. "We'll be able to discuss what we need to after," she tells Phil.

"Of course," Phil says with a grin, before turning to Tommy, "that good with you Tommy?"

He nods and grabs his jacket before following Amelia to the car.

"So..." she says, once they start driving, "Month two has come and gone."

"Yeah," Tommy admits, "I lost."

She frowns, twisting to look at him before pulling her attention back to the road.

"I haven't fucked it up," he admits, "You were right."

Amelia's frown turns into a smile- a genuine smile, Tommy knows the difference.

"I guess I owe you a DS game, huh?"

Tommy ducks his head to hide his own growing smiling.

For the first time in eight houses, he thinks he might actually be happy here.

From then on, things only improve. Tommy gets braver, more confident of his place within the house and stops being afraid of asking questions.

He finally sits down to have that talk about his IEP with Phil and learns that it actually is there to help him.

"Wait, you're saying I can just... up and leave class?" Tommy asks.

"Pretty much," Phil agrees, "as long as you notify your teacher. If you don't want to do it verbally, you can come up with some sort of sign. And you're supposed to use your breaks responsibility of course, when you need them."

Tommy frowns.

"Well what counts as a needed break then?" Tommy asks.

Phil looks at Tommy a bit, head pulling away from the line he's showing Tommy.

"What- Tommy do you know why you have accommodations?"

Tommy shrugs. He has a few guesses based on the fact he's pretty fucked up.

"Tommy, officially on paper the accommodations are here for you to support your unstable living situation, ADHD, and anxiety.

“I don’t have anxiety,” Tommy scoffs.

Phil gives a soft frown, turning away from the papers to look straight at Tommy. His eyes do that thing where they get all warm and a weird feeling appears in Tommy’s stomach.

“Tommy you are diagnosed with general anxiety disorder.”

“I am? When did that happen? I’m not fucking anxious, I don’t freak out like Wilbur does.”

“Five years ago, and Tommy, Wilbur doesn't-”

Tommy’s eyes widen.

“I was diagnosed with anxiety five years ago?” he asks, “wait when, how? And it must’ve changed now cause I’m not anxious anymore. I was a little kid then, little kids are fucking weird.”

Anxiety? There’s no way Tommy has anxiety; he’s loud and brash and puts himself in the center of attention all too often. Anxious people don’t do that. Anxious people are quiet and withdrawn and they don’t talk to anyone and that’s the opposite of what he is.

Anyways, Big Men like him don’t have anxiety. He’s not weak.

“Tommy you were seen again less than four months ago, and your file has been updated to confirm you still have anxiety.”

“Where are you getting this! I’m not fucking anxious!” The last sentence Tommy practically shouts, standing up as he does so, fists gripped at his sides. He doesn’t know- when did any of this happen? Tommy doesn’t have anxiety and he definitely doesn’t remember ever being diagnosed with it. Why the fuck does Phil keep insisting on this?

“Tommy...” Phil tries.

“No!” Tommy shouts, “No. I don’t have anxiety. I don’t even- I’ve never even been tested so I don’t know how they even-”

Honestly, Tommy’s not quite sure what he’s saying anymore, all he knows is that it’s another cause of awful whiplash of being in the system. They fuck all the time it ultimately it always ends up screwing Tommy over. And now they’ve even got Phil thinking he’s all sorts of messed up.

“Mate, the foster system is shit.”

Tommy’s almost at his wits end, ready to race away to his room, but Phil’s words are enough to interest him.

He’s never had a foster parent say anything but praises towards the system.

“What?” he asks, more dumbfounded than anything.

“The foster system is shit,” Phil repeats.

Tommy continues to sit in stunned silence.

Phil gives him a small nod, “Okay, now that you’re listening, what I’m trying to explain to you is that you were diagnosed with anxiety and ADHD, but it’s likely that you were never actually told. When you were diagnosed, the process and results probably wouldn’t properly be explained to you, so you were unaware that was what was happening.”

“I don’t have anxiety!” Tommy protests.

“Okay,” Phil repeats, “I’m not saying you do.”

“But-”

“I’ll I’m saying is that you have been diagnosed with anxiety. Diagnoses can be wrong. But it’s what your records show. Here, want me to show you?”

Tommy nods.

Phil picks up another stack of papers to his side, flipping through a few pages before landing on when and pulling it out to show to Tommy. Carefully, he goes over each line, explaining what the jumble of abbreviations stand for. Tommy zones out towards the end, but he is actually able to read and understand it now which is a big plus.

“Y’know,” Phil comments, “I know we’ve talked a bit about this before...”

“I don’t need therapy big man,” Tommy insists.

“Okay,” Phil allows, “What about thoughts on a psychiatrist?”

“What’s that?”

“Those are the people who diagnose you. You saw one to get an anxiety diagnosis.”

“No,” Tommy immediately says. He’s not exactly sure what urges him to respond so quickly, but it’s a decision he’s sticking with. He doesn’t need any doctor’s butting into his life to tell him what’s wrong with his brain.

“Alright,” Phil says, “but maybe think about it? If you actually don’t have anxiety, those would be the people to talk to about it.”

It’s the slightest bit tempting, but Tommy doesn’t want anything to do with doctor’s who think they know better than him and make choices without listening.

“Okay,” Phil says, moving the conversation on, “still want to learn about your accommodations in school?”

Tommy watches Phil for a bit, surprised that he’s not pushing the subject. Tommy’s used to adults making all his decisions for him, and while Phil’s house has been different in that way,

it's still not something he's prepared to expect.

But he gives a nod when Phil doesn't change his mind and they carry on over the papers.

He learns that he's actually allowed to leave class for breaks, because his brain works differently. Because he can't focus and sit still like everyone else and gets overwhelmed more easily he's allowed to take breaks to move around and handle his emotions.

Phil explains it to him plainly, and when Tommy blushes at the call out of his attention span, sinking into his chair, Phil defends him saying that there's nothing wrong with the fact that his ability to focus is different and that's why these accommodations are here to support him.

And for the first time, Tommy actually believes it's a support. And not a support for Phil, to get the most out of him, but a support for Tommy so school isn't quite as hard as it's always been.

He also learns he can take tests in private rooms which holy shit, where's that been all his life? He gets something called a "Low Distraction Environment" so he can actually finish his tests without the buzzing of the lights, the teacher's footsteps, and student's scratching pencils distracting him.

With that simple his changes, every one of his classes increases in letter grade. For the first time in school, he's not at risk at failing any of his classes and he actually has an A in his history class. An A!

The rest of his classes are mostly C's and Tommy's a bit ashamed to show Phil his progress report. Not because he thinks Phil will be mad, but because Tommy genuinely wants to impress him. The longer he spends here, the more he seeks the validation Phil hands out like candy.

So he passes it over, hoping to escape quickly and is shocked when Phil absolutely beams.

"You're passing all your classes," he says.

"Uh, yeah," Tommy admits.

"That's amazing Tommy, congratulations. Is it alright if I put this on the fridge?"

Tommy nods.

Phil smiles even wider, grabbing a piece of tape and sticking it on next to Wilbur's mostly straight A's and Techno's solid B's (with an A on english and a D in math, of course). As it hangs there, Tommy's eyes start to mist, and a foreign feeling starts to form in his stomach.

He excuses himself, saying he promised to call Tubbo, and Phil lets him go. He googles the odd feeling in his stomach and figures out it's called pride.

Tommy's proud of himself. What a strange feeling.

Chapter End Notes

I love my neurodivergent children.

Also this fic has increased by two chapters bc I just can't help myself and wrote another 7k+ words.

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falling into place

Chapter Summary

Tommy bonds a bit with Wilbur and learns a few things about his history. The holidays draw closer and things don't go wrong. Tommy finally finds himself somewhere that he belongs.

Chapter Notes

CW: talk of genitalia/sex organs, p-word used in a derogatory way, mentions of past family/parent death, discussion of mental illness, insensitiveness around intersex and trans people, ableism

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Things are starting to change now. He's starting to fit in better, chill out a bit more. He finds himself hanging in the living room more often instead of hanging in his room.

Wilbur catches him on the couch one day with his DS out and calls his name.

"Yeah?" Tommy says, turning to face him.

"Wanna go get ice cream?"

It's a kind offer and Tommy's instant reaction is heck yeah. But even though Wilbur has been nothing but kind, a random request to get ice cream with him is out of the usual.

"Why?" Tommy asks, doing his best to investigate.

"For ice cream, and to talk," Wilbur says.

Tommy's still slightly suspicious, but hey, ice cream. And worst comes to worst he could just refuse to talk.

"Okay," Tommy agrees, "Let me grab my shoes?"

"I'll meet you in the car," Wilbur agrees.

Tommy hops off the couch, quickly saving his game and grabbing shoes before meeting Wilbur at the car. Without Techno, he's able to take shotgun, sliding into the seat with ease. It's nice to stretch his legs.

The car ride is casual, Wilbur playing music Tommy's never heard before as he always does and singing along. He's actually pretty good, but he often sings off key to get a smile from Tommy. It's stupid, he's stupid. Why can't Tommy stop smiling?

He really loves Wilbur's music too. He hasn't heard a lot besides mainstream pop or some rap on the radio from different families he's been in. But Wilbur has shown him music stretches far and wide and Tommy's even started making his own playlists, often consisting of songs from different video games. They don't have lyrics, but Tommy's fond of the vibe and he can put them on in the background while he does homework.

"So," Wilbur says as they sit down with their ice cream, "I wanted to talk to you about therapy."

Tommy groans and stops eating his mint chip.

"I already told Phil I don't need therapy," he insists.

"Okay," Wilbur agrees easily, "But that's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is the fact that I need therapy."

Tommy isn't sure where this is going, much less what he's supposed to say. He takes a bite of his ice cream and scratches at one of the napkins with his nails.

"Tommy, therapy helps me," Wilbur begins. He takes a deep breath, and pauses for a second before restarting, "Ever since I was a kid, I had really bad anxiety, yeah? And it got bad enough that I'd panic about pretty much everything. And when I mean I was a kid, I mean I was really really young. It made sense at first, because I had lost my parents really young, but everything continued.

"And then as I approached preteen years I started getting these crazy mood swings, and there were other weird signs and it... well my aunt and uncle started to question if it was more than-" Wilbur sighs, and pauses, "Tommy I'm intersex. I have a uterus. I was raised as a girl for the first ten years of my life."

What the fuck? Wilbur has a vagina? Wilbur- but he doesn't have boobs- does he even have a dick? Tommy has so many questions.

But before he can speak up, Wilbur carries on.

"And that was a huge shock and I really struggled with that and my gender identity for a long time," Wilbur continues, "I felt like I had been lied to my whole life and everything was falling apart. Therapy was the only thing keeping me together.

"But overtime things got better. Through all of that I had this wonderful support and I- I got through it. I was okay. I found a place where I was comfortable with my body, at peace with my parents death, and managing my mental health. Eventually, I stopped going.

"About a year after that, my aunt and uncle died, and losing my last remaining family made everything ten times harder, and brought depression along with it. I was struggling a lot and

couldn't function. I was in a really bad place again and I couldn't talk to anyone about it. And then I ended up at Phil's.

"He gave me the option, the opportunity, so I started therapy again. And therapy has helped a lot, it's been a place to talk about what's stressing me out. Therapy saved me, saved my life. I know- I get that you might not go. I'm not going to make you. But it would be nice for you to be supportive of that."

"Alright," Tommy responds when Wilbur's look lingers for a bit too long. He doesn't know what Wilbur wants, but he's obviously looking for some sort of response, "Okay, yeah I get that. But like explain the intersex thing."

Wilbur raises his eyebrows.

"That's kinda but insensitive bud. Is that all?"

Well that's not it, but that's definitely the main thing he wants to be hearing about. The therapy thing... okay, whatever Tommy gets it. Therapy's good for Wilbur. But Wilbur's intersex?

But they're not talking about that apparently.

"Okay?" he half asks, "I guess I just don't get why you still freak out over simple things after all this time. It doesn't really seem like therapy's helped fix that."

"It has and it hasn't," Wilbur says, "Tommy it's a lot more complex than that. The chemicals in my brain work differently, and going to a therapist doesn't change how the chemicals work, it just helps me react better to them. Therapy doesn't fix anything, all it does is give me better coping skills and someone to talk to."

That makes a little bit of sense, Tommy guesses. He hadn't ever really thought of anxiety as a physical issue, but hearing Wilbur explain how his brain actually works differently opens his mind.

He's always thought of therapy as for pussies who couldn't get their shit together.

But Wilbur isn't a pussy, Wilbur's one of the nicest people Tommy has ever met and he's strong, and brave, and sweet.

Tommy's not about to go to therapy by any means, he doesn't need that shit, he doesn't need someone to talk to. But maybe he can be okay with the fact that Wilbur does need somebody to talk to.

"Okay," Tommy says, "yeah, I guess that makes sense."

"Yeah?" Wilbur says.

Tommy nods.

Wilbur gives a small smile.

"Now the intersex thing?" Tommy asks.

"Now the intersex thing," Wilbur agrees, "but first I'm prefacing this with the fact that I have the right to not answer any question. You ask. And I'm pretty open, but know that like... these aren't just things you can go about asking people?"

"Do you have a dick?" Tommy blurts out.

"And," Wilbur drawls, "that's a great example of what not to ask people actually."

Tommy cringes a bit at the reaction. He was curious! But well... It does seem kind of invasive now that he's said it. Who asks stuff like that?

That's kinda really fucking rude. Plus he's never met someone who's intersex before, but he has met someone who's trans and he know how much of a dick move that is it to ask.

"Sorry," Tommy mumbles, "I didn't realize how rude it sounded until I said that."

Wilbur softens, "it's alright, just be a bit more aware of what you say, yeah? It's personal, and something I've gotten a lot of judgement for. It's like- well it's not exactly comparable, but how would you like if I started digging into your foster history and judging who you are based off that, y'know?"

That would... that would suck. Tommy's been kicked out of so many houses and fucked up so many times and he hasn't even meant to. He doesn't even know what he did wrong most of the time.

"I feel like that's probably the best thing you can relate to," Wilbur continues. He sighs, "yes, I have a dick, sorta. It's very small and isn't fully... formed? I dunno there's a lot of medical terms I don't remember. I don't have testes though."

Tommy's eyes go wide.

"That's a thing?" he asks.

Wilbur laughs, "Yeah."

"Wait so you can't have kids?"

"I don't actually know," Wilbur says, "I definitely can't get anyone pregnant, but I might be able to get pregnant, might not."

That's- Wilbur could carry a fucking kid?

"Wait, so are you trans then?" Tommy asks

"Yes?" Wilbur hesitates, "yes and no. A lot of- intersex people don't all have the same experience, so this is just mine. I consider myself trans because I was raised female and came to identify as male. So personally yes, I'm trans."

"Oh. Pog," Tommy says.

Wilbur gives him a smile, and they finish their ice cream together. Tommy finds himself enjoying the outing and his time with Wilbur, even if his mind is fucking blown. He kinda wants to ask Wil some more questions about this whole thing but his mind is racing and he doesn't know exactly what to ask.

Oh well, he can always ask another time. Maybe he can think a bit more too, instead of blurting out the first thing that pops in his head and being super insensitive.

The next week he invites Tubbo over to his Phil's house. Phil even offers to have Tubbo stay the night, and since it's the weekend, Tubbo's more than able.

Wilbur picks them up from school, introducing himself to Tubbo, who cheerily greets the older teenager. Wilbur gives him a fond smile and ruffles Tommy's hair as he teases him about making friends.

"Techno coming?" Tommy asks, pink-haired boy still nowhere in sight.

"Dad picked him up early," Wilbur says.

Tommy frowns.

"Why? He alright?"

Techno's pretty cool. He lets Tommy join him on his runs on the weekend and he gave Tommy an old DS game he had lying around. It's not a very good game, but hey it's the thought that counts.

Wilbur glances at Tubbo, who looks respectfully uninterested.

"I dunno," Wilbur admits, "Bad day I think. Something's up with him though."

What does that mean? What's up with Techno? What's going on?

He briefly wonders if it has anything to do with the voices Techno mentioned.

"Okay," Tommy says, voice small as he climbs in the car. Techno's not here, so he could take the seat in the front, but somehow that feels like a violation of what is rightfully Techno's.

"Hey, don't worry about it, I'm sure he'll be fine," Wilbur comforts.

Tommy exhales and nods. Techno's fine.

They get home, Tubbo and him quickly ditching the house for the park nearby. They sit on the swings, rocking slowly and chatting about nothing. Tubbo has slowly become his best friend.

Tommy talks to a few other kids at school, but it's hard to make friends when you're the new kid, and it's hard to trust anybody with information about his life. He's been 'the foster kid'

at school before, and really doesn't want a repeat of that experience.

"You know- I'm kinda glad I ran into you on your first day," Tubbo admits.

Tommy laughs.

"Dude, you were so panicked."

"I was going to be late!" he protests, "You were late!"

"True," he admits.

"Do you ever think about things like that?" Tubbo asks, foot scraping the wood chips below them.

"Think about what?" Tommy asks, watching as Tubbo slowly digs a bigger and bigger hole.

"Like, the chance of that happening, me running into you. Think about it, it was your first day, right? That's already only one day in the entire year. Then it also happened to be the day I switched classes. And that only happened because they put me in the wrong class. Which only happened because I have the one counselor out of five who never actually looks over student's schedules. And then- the class change itself was 610 and 6's and 9's are my worst numbers and those two classes are on exact opposite sides of the school, which was why I was even running in the first place. And then you also had the same class and had gotten lost.

"Just the chances of it all, of me running into you in that exact corridor at that exact time, do you ever wonder about the chances of all that?"

Tommy stares at Tubbo.

"No," he admits.

It's true, Tommy's never considered coincidences like that. And it's already complex with Tubbo's reasoning but as Tommy thinks about it he realizes it goes so much deeper.

Because the chances Tommy was placed in a house near Tubbo's school at that time are infinitesimally small. In addition to the fact that Phil gave him an option to take a few days to settle in and asked him what time he wanted to get to school.

There's so many variables and possibilities that Tommy has never once considered before, but quickly send him spiraling.

"Oh," Tubbo says, face flushing.

"I mean- I have now," Tommy scrambles, "I have. I have now."

They slowly swing in silence for a bit longer.

"Hey Tubbo?"

“Yeah?”

“I’m kinda glad you ran into me on my first day too.”

Together, they share smiles.

Techno’s not at dinner that night, and Tommy’s a mixture of disappointed and worried. On one hand, worried, because it’s not like Techno to change his routine, and combined with earlier, there’s obviously something going on. On the other hand, Tommy’s also a bit disappointed because Tubbo’s talked a bit about his older sibling Eret who’s away at uni and Tommy- well Tommy had kinda wanted him to meet Wilbur and Techno too.

Wilbur and Techno aren’t his brothers per say, but on that note, neither is Eret’s necessarily Tubbo’s because he doesn’t just use he pronouns apparently. (Tommy’s still trying to figure out what that means exactly). So he’s got his two foster brothers, and Tubbo’s got his not-quite-a brother.

So in the end, Tubbo only gets to meet Wil.

Maybe another time.

Tubbo’s mom picks him up the first thing the next morning, and Phil greets her with a smile. They both thank each other and quickly laugh over how their two charges have become fast friends.

When Tubbo and her leave, Phil calls his name.

“Tommy.”

“Yeah?” he asks, first foot already on the stairs.

“I’m proud of you.”

Tommy chuckles.

“What do you mean?” Tommy’s pretty sure he hasn’t done anything as of late to get such approval for.

“I remember when Techno and Wilbur first invited friends over,” he admits, “and I’m not going to pretend I know exactly how you feel, but I’m proud that you did. I can imagine it can be hard, coming to an all new house and having nothing feel like it’s yours. I’m glad you invited Tubbo over to spend time with you, at your house.”

“My house,” Tommy says.

“Yeah,” Phil agrees, “your house. Hopefully, if you’re willing, our house one day.”

“My house,” Tommy repeats. Phil nods and Tommy’s eyes get overwhelmingly blurry. He darts forward with a choked sob, hugging Phil.

“Thanks,” he whispers into Phil’s warmth.

Phil doesn’t hesitate for a second, quickly wraps his own arms around Tommy, pulling him close.

Phil gives the best hugs, even better than the weighted blanket he got three months ago. They’re warm, and tight, but best of all they’re from something living. Tommy falls apart in his arms and Phil puts him back together again.

The next weeks start to go smoother than Tommy could ever imagine any house being like. Midterms are fast approaching, and there’s a tense atmosphere that comes with it, but for once, the tenseness isn’t something that’s coming from Tommy or anything he’s particularly sensitive to.

The tenseness is coming from Wilbur.

Tommy guesses it has to do with the approaching midterms because pretty much the only thing Wilbur talks about these days is uni apps and school. He’s so wound up about it, that his rants even get Tommy worried about his own grades. And he’s never cared much about his grades besides pleasing whatever family he’s with.

Techno seems irritated by it all as well, and he spends more time outside. Tommy notices that he tends to the one out of place rose bush at the front of the house more than usual.

Phil’s the only one who doesn’t seem frustrated with it, letting Wilbur rant on about school and only offering help when asked for it. Tommy doesn’t know how he does it. Tommy doesn’t understand why Wilbur’s acting so stressed about finals when he already gets good grades. He doesn’t have anything to worry about.

They’re eating dinner one night when Tommy’s had enough.

He’s relaxed and finally fitting onto this odd family. Winter break is in two weeks and he’s so ready to be off of school. But Wilbur’s constant stress is ruining the vibes.

“Dude,” Tommy groans, “Can’t you just chill about school for one second?”

“Right, sorry,” Wilbur says immediately, and shuts up for the first time in a week. Was it really that easy? Tommy should have done that days ago.

“Hey, Wil, it’s alright,” Phil says, completely undermining Tommy’s point.

“No,” Wilbur mumbles, “Tommy’s got a point it’s- it’s not productive to keep bringing it up. I’m just worried and it’s a lot and it’s senior year, y’know and I can’t- I really need to do well. Because if I don’t, then I can’t get into university.”

And great, now Wilbur’s rambling again, words all blurring together. His breaths are short and close together as he bites through his words.

“And don’t even get me started on university, I’ve barely started apps because there’s so much schoolwork and I’m so behind. But if I work on them then I can’t study and I need to

study because I need to do well on my midterms to get to university and-

“Wil,” Phil cuts in.

Wilbur turns to look at him, eyes glassy and breathing short. His hands shake on the table.

“Wilbur let’s just breathe for a moment, okay?” Phil says.

Wilbur’s panting at this point, chest heaving with effort and he’s trembling. Tommy and Techno watch the action from afar, extras in a scene that they are very obviously not supposed to be in.

Wilbur’s eyes are wide and panicked.

“You’re having an anxiety attack,” Phil tells him, “You’re going to be okay, let’s just work on breathing. Do you want your meds?”

Wilbur nods.

“Techno, can you grab Wil’s emergency meds?” Phil asks without looking over, still focused on Wilbur. Techno nods and scoots away from the table, turning towards the cabinets in the kitchen.

Tommy half watches him open one of the cabinets, pulling out a basket of medication and half watches Phil soothing talk to Wilbur, guiding him through taking deep breaths. Tommy feels incredibly out of place.

He also feels incredibly guilty.

Because, he realizes, whatever this is, happened because of him. Wilbur had been fine talking about school and it wasn’t until Tommy cut him off that he reacted like this. He’s fucked up. He knew he would eventually. He can’t even really care about that right now though, because Wilbur’s obviously not doing well. Tommy feels his ears burn in shame at hurting the older boy. He doesn’t quite know what Wilbur is to him. He’s not a brother, nor a friend, but Tommy cares about him and he hates that he’s the one to cause him to hurt this way.

He stays out of the interaction, watching as Techno hands a bottle of pills to Wilbur. Wilbur’s hands are shaking and he struggles with the lid, so Techno takes it back and carefully opens it himself. He hands a pill over to Wilbur and grabs Wil’s glass of water and puts it in the boy’s other hand.

Wilbur quickly downs it, and the small nugget of curiosity Tommy has at the action is drowned out by the guilt he feels.

Phil continues to talk quietly to Wilbur, who nods and soon enough Phil’s holding him close.

Techno doesn’t sit back down, instead clearing his own plate and Phil’s when Phil says it’s okay. He goes to Tommy next, gesturing towards the plate. Tommy startles before giving a quick nod and scooting out of the way. Techno does all three of their dishes, leaving Wilbur’s untouched.

After, he rounds back over to Tommy who's been mostly watching as Wilbur sinks lower into Phil and slowly calms.

"Give them space," Techno says quietly, "This happens, just give space and time. Go do something else."

Tommy blinks and looks over, hoping for a little more guidance.

He doesn't get any. In fact, Techno leaves the room completely, retreating down the hall to his bedroom. Tommy awkwardly sits there for a few more seconds before listening to what Techno said and taking his own lead.

Tommy ruminates on the fact that he caused this whole thing, and the thoughts are enough to have him approaching Wilbur's cracked door a day later.

Music comes from within and Tommy gently knocks. The music cuts off and Wilbur peers out from inside.

Tommy shoves the door forward gently, enough to clearly look in. Wilbur catches his glance and stands up, going to the door and opening it further, inviting him in with a nod of his head.

He's wearing a large shirt instead of his normal sweaters, a tank top under it, the strap visible.

Wait, holy shit, that's not a tank top, is it? That's a sports bra. Wilbur wears bras?

"You wear a bra?" Tommy asks. Immediately he snaps his mouth shut, horrified at his own words. What had he said a few days earlier about not being insensitive? He hadn't meant it! He had just... sorta said it.

Wilbur gives him an odd look.

"Yeah," he says, "sports bras. I have boobs, they're just really small."

"Boobs?"

"Yes Tommy," Wilbur says dryly, "now did you just come in here to ask me about my tits?"

Tommy takes a step in, standing at the center as Wilbur takes a seat on a pile of beanbags and picks his guitar back up, strumming it softly.

He waves at the pillows next to him, and Tommy carefully takes a seat.

"What's up," Wilbur asks.

"I uh, I didn't mean to be a jerk the other day," Tommy admits.

"What do you mean?" Wilbur asks, giving him a glance before returning to his guitar.

Is Wilbur serious right now? Is he really going to make Tommy spell out his mistakes?

"About, y'know, the school stuff."

Wilbur's entire face softens.

"Hey it's okay, you didn't know," Wilbur says.

Tommy didn't know, but that shouldn't be an excuse. He fucked up, like he always ends up doing. He hurt Wil, who's been nothing but friendly to him.

"Still," Tommy mumbles, surprisingly vulnerable. He's not really used to apologizing, usually he's loud and abrasive, denying any wrongdoings but he's found himself genuinely caring about Wilbur.

And with that comes caring about Wilbur's feelings.

"I have anxiety, it happens," Wilbur says, "maybe next time just... approach it a bit nicer?"

Tommy nods, not trusting himself to say anything and fuck up again. Wilbur plays a few more notes on his guitar. Tommy sinks into the pillows and let's the sound wash over him.

Besides that one night, it's a pretty calm lead into midterms and winter break, and boy is Tommy loving the time off.

There's a bit of an edge to Tommy's mood, even so. It's not that he isn't enjoying breakfast, it's just that there's always a bit of tenseness that comes from the holidays.

Most families have traditions and rituals and it's always difficult trying to find his place.

So far, the house has been chill. They set up a tree and hot chocolate is made more frequently, but the house doesn't seem to do a lot. The one thing they apparently do is go to an outdoor Christmas market every year.

"You don't have to come," Phil tells him, "it's your choice-" Phil's big in that, always giving Tommy choices- "Wilbur, Techno, and I will be going. And if you want to leave at any time we can do that to."

Tommy looks at him, and considers. It isn't a trap, he knows it isn't. He's- he's- well he doesn't trust Phil completely by yet, but he can get behind this.

"Okay," Tommy agrees, and that weekend he shuffles into the car with everyone else.

"Techno, headphones?" Phil checks from the front seat.

"Got 'em," Techno responds, reaching up to touch them, confirming that they are in fact there.

"Stim toys? Comfort item?"

Techno nods at the first, hands already going to fidget with his tangle, but quickly hesitates at the second.

He frowns, leg tapping the floor of the car.

"One second," he eventually decides, before darting out of the car and back into the house.

Tommy's feeling a bit braver and a bit more confident, so while Techno's racing back inside, he speaks up.

"Comfort item?" he asks.

"Yeah," Phil agrees, "Pretty much what it sounds like, an item that brings you comfort. For autistic people this can be a particularly strong connection and comfort items can be really important to regulating emotion and feeling safe."

That... well it makes sense Tommy thinks. He doesn't think he has anything quite like that, but his DS definitely holds sentimental value to him. But how Phil presents the idea of a comfort object has Tommy's leg bouncing in a way he's begun to recognize as not just stimming, but also nervousness.

Why wouldn't Techno feel safe?

Tommy's nervous, but he's also working on trying with this family, something he's not really used to. So he gathers his courage and asks.

"Why... wouldn't Techno feel safe?"

Phil catches his gaze in the rearview mirror.

"I didn't mean like that," he says, face softening as he spots Tommy's. "The market can be busy. It's crowded, and can be loud with lots of things happening. It can get overwhelming for Techno and comfort items usually help him in situations like that."

Oh. Okay then. Tommy relaxes into his seat, worries soothed.

Techno returns a minute later, and he opens the car door with one hand, a book in the other. Tommy barely catches the title 'The Art of War' before Techno's shoving it into the small backpack he's brought. He didn't know what he had expected the comfort object to be, but Tommy wasn't prepared for a book.

But thinking about it makes perfect sense. Tommy realizes he's seen this book before too. Techno carries it in his backpack at school and he had been reading it on the couch during that one movie night Wilbur didn't come to a few weeks ago.

Tommy fiddles with his hands and picks at his nail beds as he quickly gets bored. He glances over and sees Techno with his tangle, and realizes he could bring something similar.

"Can- can I grab something really quick?" Tommy mumbles out.

Phil catches his sight in the mirror.

"Of course," he says, and Tommy takes the chance to dart back inside.

When he gets to his room he quickly grabs two of the stim toys he's grown fond of, the fidget cube and a marble trap. He shoves both in his pocket and bounds back down the stairs and back to the car.

Forgotten items now remembered, they finally head off.

The event isn't huge, but it makes you in size for the amount of people packed in. The size of the parking lot already has Tommy's heart hammering and he looks ahead to see people funneling forward.

It's a lot like a farmers market, he realizes- except holiday themed. Everyone's packed tightly and close together, and while little shops and setups are divided, they all sort of blend together into a giant ball of chaos.

It's an overwhelming blend of holiday spirit and Tommy thinks he both loves and hates it. The bright red, greens, and twinkling lights catch his attention and he finds himself staring out the window, eyes locked on the decoration. Wilbur is similarly distracted, staring to point out things from the window as Techno helps Phil find an open spot to park.

When they finally do find a spot and get out of the car, Tommy stays close, now used to Phil's 'game plans' at the beginning of every outing.

"Game plan," Phil says, as they all gather, and yup there it is, "we'll walk around for a bit. Feel free to split up, but tell me and check your phones. If anyone gets overwhelmed or needs to leave for any reason, let me know and we can figure that out. Sound good?"

All three of them nod.

Phil gives them smiles and then pulls out his wallet. He slides out a few bills and hands one to Wilbur, then Techno, and finally Tommy. Tommy holds the slightly wrinkled bill in his hand, the number 20 along with some random fucker's face staring straight up at him.

"An early Christmas present," Phil tells them.

Tommy barely hears him, looking down at the bill in his hand. He glances over at Techno and Wil's bills, noticing that he's received the same amount. His fingers tighten around it slightly, crinkling it a bit more.

He hasn't- He hasn't been just handed money before, to spend on whatever he wants. Not even a dollar. He gets that not all the family's he's been with had the money like Phil does. But it's not just the money.

It's the idea.

The idea that Phil is giving something to Tommy that has worth for Tommy to do what he pleases with. It's the idea of how casually he gave Tommy a bill along with Techno and Wil, and that it was the same amount. It's the fact that Phil creates opportunities for Tommy to make his own choices.

Tommy hasn't had many choices in his life, but living with Phil he's slowly realizing he has more and more.

He stares down at the bill, then notices he's getting left behind. He shoves it in his pocket and races after the other three.

He spends most of his time padding after the others, never leaving to split off.

When the group does start to split in different directions, Tommy chooses to hang by Will, using his height as a shield from the crowd.

He's anxious at first, trying to figure out a new setting and dynamic, but the energy of the area quickly sinks into him and has him standing tall with a grin on his face.

Wilbur is equally excited, doing his best to keep the group together and drag them from location to location, showing them everything in sight, even though Techno and Phil have already seen it all before.

But lucky for Wilbur, he has a new victim- Tommy. He talks about each area, pointing out reoccurring stands and decorations and making Tommy try what he swears is the best hot chocolate ever.

It's a whirlwind of a day, and Tommy often finds himself starting to flap his hands as his body fills with intense positive emotions.

It's mid afternoon when his energy starts to die down, and Wilbur seems to be at a similar point. He walks slower and the family stops more often away from the crowds instead of stuck in the middle of things.

Techno especially seems to be getting close to done, headphones shoved over his ears and stimming with an infinity cube as he rocks back and forth.

Everyone's social meters are running low, and so with little prompting, they call it a day, and head back home while everyone is still in good spirits.

It's during the car ride home that Tommy remembers the money that sits in his pocket, unspent. His hand goes to it, fingers brushing over the bill and he lets out a small sigh.

When they get home, everyone bundles back into the house, Wilbur and Techno going their separate ways pretty quickly. Tommy hangs back, waiting to get Phil alone.

Phil peers at him, with a small smile.

"Did you have fun?" he asks.

"Yeah," Tommy admits, "It was nice." It really was. It was a nice atmosphere, a nice ambience and Tommy had felt- well he'd been with people he cared about. It had been a picture perfect day, like something out of a fucking movie. It had been really nice.

He shoves his hand in his pocket, pulling out the folded bill.

“Here,” he says, holding it out to Phil, “I didn’t spend it, so…” he shrugs. Phil looks down at the bill, but doesn’t reach to take it.

“You can keep it Tommy,” Phil says softly.

Tommy blinks at him. It’s one of those odd moments he has with Phil, where he’s taller and looking down at Phil, but somehow feels so much smaller in comparison.

“Oh, okay,” Tommy says, “Thanks.”

Phil gives him another smile- those stupid wide ones that never fail to make Tommy’s insides warm.

“Merry Christmas Tommy,” Phil says.

“Merry Christmas,” Tommy murmurs back.

The holidays continue, with cold nights with warm hot chocolate. Techno can often be found curled up in front of the fireplace with a book or five. Phil takes a whole week off to spend more time with them, and they go on a few more outings. They put up a Christmas Tree. Wilbur joins to put up ornaments, even though he’s spent the last two days shut inside his room fretting over university apps. All four of them make tiny spear swords out of candy canes, and Phil threatens to take them away when Techno gets dangerously close to poking Wilbur.

Tommy promised himself he’d never fall in love with another family.

He thinks he is anyways.

Chapter End Notes

I forget this chapter ended like this and I made myself emotional when I did the last read through before posting. oops.

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

[encompass: the sandbox](#): encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

[encompass: behind the scenes](#): an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

popping the question

Chapter Summary

A few challenges pop up in the lives of the people around Tommy. But even so, things work out. They work out and things are good and then Phil... well Phil asks the question.

Chapter Notes

CW: ableism, self-sabotage, mentions of dead family, self worth issues, breaking boundaries, intentionally triggering someone, conflict, yelling, verbal fights

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The next month starts off with a bang. Literally. Tommy's hopping down the stairs taking them two at a time, planning to grab a snack from the kitchen before returning to his room, maybe bugging Wilbur on his way back. He freezes in place when a large sound rings through the house.

From his spot on the stairs, he can see Techno slam his hands down at the table as he yells at Phil.

Phil stands across from him, hands at his side as he waits for Techno to finish.

When Techno's finished screaming, Phil speaks up.

Phil's voice is strong, but not loud. Unlike Techno he doesn't raise his voice, but it carries all the same.

"You're not allowed to leave the house by yourself for anything longer than two hours," Phil tells him, "You're not to open the mail. I'm going to be checking your phone daily. Do you understand?"

"Do I understand, do I fucking understand? No Phil, I don't understand. She literally sent me two letters and now I'm not allowed to leave the house?"

"You tried to take a bus-"

"I wasn't going to!"

"Was that before or after I called you that you made that decision?"

Techno seethes. Tommy stands stock still, heart beating at the confrontation and anger emanating from the room.

"If you want to discuss what I've set down, we can do that, but I'm not going to discuss this with you when you're coming from a place of anger and hurt," Phil adds.

Techno huffs and storms off down the hall his room is attached to, slamming the door shut behind him.

Tommy jumps at the bang it makes.

Phil sighs, rubbing a hand over his face as his shoulders fall.

Tommy turns to go back upstairs, but just as he starts to turn, Phil looks up, catching his gaze.

"Uhhh," Tommy stutters.

"Hey Tommy," Phil sighs. He looks absolutely dead on his feet.

"Hi?"

"Were you going to get a snack?"

Tommy nods.

"C'mon down," Phil encourages, "I can help find you something."

Tommy studies him for a moment, before hesitantly taking a step down the stairs, and then another.

He joins Phil in the kitchen and grabs some crackers while Phil cuts an apple for him. Tommy doesn't mention how the older's hands shake and his breath hisses slightly on the exhale. Neither of them mention Techno.

From there, things only get worse. Techno doesn't show up to dinner.

"Tech okay?" Wilbur asks as he frowns at the missing boy's seat.

"I don't think so," Phil says, "I'd give him a bit of space for now."

Wilbur nods, and pokes at his food, hands trembling lightly.

Phil breaks the frosty silence by asking about Tommy's day, and Tommy shares about how Tubbo and he have a master plan to get the teacher to take away the final test of the semester. Phil snorts at the story, Wilbur uncharacteristically quiet at his side.

"What about you Wil?" Phil asks, "How are college apps going?"

Phil's voice is gentle, caring. It took Tommy a little bit, but he's slowly come to realize how bad Wilbur's anxiety really is and how much of it has been focused on college apps. Tommy's seen his report cards, he has no doubt that Wilbur could get into any number of

school's he wants. Tommy doesn't really understand his anxiety. But he's learning that even though he doesn't understand it, it's true to Wilbur and Tommy hates to see him hurt.

Tommy also knows that Wilbur has barely started any of his college apps, something he told Techno and Tommy in confidence. Honestly, Tommy hadn't cared much or really thought it about until now.

Wilbur's hand tightens his grip around his fork and Tommy has a sinking feeling of how this conversation is going to go.

"Fine," he mumbles.

Phil frowns, obviously noticing how strange Wil is acting.

"I know deadlines are coming up," he acknowledges.

"I said they're fine!" Wilbur hisses.

Phil shuts his mouth and leans back.

"Whatever, I have homework," Wilbur grumbles, picking up his plate from where it's only half-finished and beginning to buss it.

"Wil," Phil tries, but Wilbur's already gone.

Phil and Tommy finish their dinner in silence.

It's not the foot dropping like Tommy was waiting for. It's not them finally dropping the act of being the perfect family.

This is something completely different, something Tommy's never seen before.

Because Techno and Phil yelled at each other, but later that week Techno is sobbing into Phil's arms on the couch. Wilbur stormed off at dinner but Tommy catches Phil inviting Wilbur to go out on a walk a few days later.

It's weird. There's tension points for the first time in the house, but instead of them lingering and festering until they get worse and worse, things seem to get better.

Not perfect, sure. Wilbur's still unnaturally sullen and Techno goes running more frequently. Phil frowns more and sighs frequently. But there's no more outbursts, no more breakdowns, and nobody stays mad at each other.

Even so, Tommy still finds Techno angrily huffing as he prunes the rose bush outside the house. Tommy's always considered it a bit odd. It's the only rose bush in the entire yard, with vivid red flowers. Techno's always taking care of it, checking up on it, but never bothering much with the other plants.

Tommy walks closer, and as he does so, catches Techno talking to himself.

"Shut up," he mutters, "you don't know shit. You're not even fucking real."

"Hey," Tommy says.

"Fuck off," Techno says.

"Techno?"

Techno turns, facing Tommy behind him

"Oh. Shit sorry Tommy, I didn't realize..." he trails off.

Tommy blinks trying to figure out exactly what he didn't realize.

"Didn't realize what?" he asks.

Techno sucks his head, cheeks burning.

"I uh, didn't realize it was you."

"Who else would it be?" Tommy asks, and then immediately remembers how he caught Techno talking to himself just a moment before. The voices. Right. "Oh. Okay."

Techno looks off to the side.

"What's up with the rose bush?" Tommy asks, curiosity driving him.

"I'm pruning it," Techno explains.

"Yeah but- why? You're always doing stuff to it. What's so special about it?"

Techno sighs, standing up from where he's been kneeling on the ground, now on more equal footing to Tommy. Tommy still takes pride in the fact that even with Techno standing, he's still an inch or so taller.

"Phil got me this rose bush," he admits.

Tommy makes a face. Phil got Techno a bush?

"Why?" he asks.

Techno shrugs.

"We planted it when the adoption papers finally went through," he admits, "I think it was Phil's way of saying that things were going to be permanent, y'know?"

"There's not one for Wilbur?" Tommy notes, and wonders what that means.

Techno gives him a glance.

"No," he agrees, "Wilbur got a photo album scrapbook. With old and new pictures. Showed him that we weren't replacing his family, y'know? Just adding on."

Tommy considers it, wrapping his mind around Phil's thoughtfulness and understanding of each of his adopted children.

For a quick second, Tommy wonders what he would get, and then freezes at the implication, immediately pushing the thought away.

Tommy takes a moment to consider how weird this family is.

Techno and Phil are fighting and Wilbur's doing whatever he's doing but they still obviously care about each other, love each other and Tommy's never seen humans act like this before. It's baffling, and confusing but Tommy's okay with it.

It tells him that maybe when Tommy fucks up (because he will, he always does) Phil, Techno, and Wil will still love and care about him.

Maybe?

"Tommy? Have a minute?" Phil asks, rapping slightly on his open door. Tommy's struggling to do homework at his desk, stimming with his fidget cube as he tries desperately to focus.

"Yes," he sighs with relief, happy to be pulled away from his fruitless attempts to understand what he's supposed to be reading.

"Can I come in?"

Tommy nods and Phil enters, sitting gently on the side of Tommy's bed.

"I wanted to talk about an idea," he prefaces.

"Okay?" Tommy says.

"When you were placed here, I know Amelia told you that Techno and Wilbur had also been in the system, and that I had adopted them both."

"Yeah," he agrees. At the words his heart starts beating loudly and his hands start faintly trembling.

"Well, it's been five months now," Phil says, "And I- we- love having you here. And I hope you feel the same way."

Holy shit holy shit holy shit this cannot be happening Tommy has to be dreaming.

"So," Phil says, "There's no pressure to answer now, but I'd love for you to think about if you have interest in being adopted. Because I would love to. Adopt you that is. But it's a big thing to think about."

Tommy nods his head weakly.

“Alright,” Phil says, “Do you want me to stay, or go?”

Tommy’s shaking. He can feel himself shaking. His entire body is trembling and feels the information sink into his bloodstream, travelling across his entire body.

“You can go,” he whispers.

Phil nods and stands, slowly exiting.

“I love you Tommy,” he whispers and he’s gone.

Fuck. Phil just did that.

Phil just, Phil just asked him about adoption.

Tommy’s fifteen years old and he might finally get a family.

Phil- Phil asked if he wanted to be adopted.

And Tommy- Tommy wants it.

He wants it so bad. So very fucking bad. He wants it with his entire soul. He wants a family, and he wants that family to be Phil, and Techno, and Wilbur. He wants to go to school everyday, forced to sit in the back seat while Wilbur and Techno fight over music. He wants to go on new runs with Techno, travelling every inch of the town until he knows it all. He wants to learn to play guitar, have Wilbur teach him chords and laugh at him when he messes up. He wants Phil to hug him, care for him, to pick out a thoughtful gift as he’s done for both Tech and Wil.

He wants Phil to talk to him, to sit him down and chat, to ask him how his day’s going, if he’s doing okay, if he wants anything all because he cares. Because Phil cares, loves him unconditionally and he wants to adopt Tommy and Tommy would be his son.

And Tommy...

Tommy has to say no.

Tommy can’t say yes. Because adopting means forever.

And Phil doesn’t want him, not really. Tommy’s tricked him into thinking he wants him, that’s all.

Phil shouldn’t want him.

Because Tommy’s kind of a fuck up. And somehow, miraculously Phil hasn’t seen that yet, but it’ll happen. It always does.

Adoption has been a dream of Tommy’s for awhile now, but that’s all it is, a dream.

Phil doesn't want him. Phil shouldn't want him. And- and if Phil can't see that himself, Tommy will have to prove it.

He starts small.

He skips class once, then twice, then a third landing himself in detention for the first time this school year. Phil picks him up because Wilbur and Techno have already left without him over an hour ago. Phil's quiet in the car and Tommy hides his smirk in the window.

"Are you alright?" Phil asks.

"What do you mean?" Tommy huffs.

"You don't skip class for no reason," Phil says.

Tommy shrugs.

"Just felt like it," he says.

"Okay," Phil says, "well, if you want to talk about it, I'm always here."

Tommy ignores him, going straight up to his room. He pitches his bag onto the floor and kicks his shoes off. He falls on his bed with a groan. Plan one, failed. Phil's too fucking nice, Tommy's going to have to step his game up.

His phone buzzes and he pulls it out of his pocket with a sigh. Luckily, the notification is quick to cure his sour mood.

Tubbo: *how was detenshun?*

Tommy types back eagerly.

Tommy: *hell*

Tommy: *u literally sit still for a fucking hour what the hell is this torture*

Tubbo: *lol*

Tubbo: *y did u skip class anyways?*

Tubbo: *uve never before and then you sudenly skip three times???*

Tommy: *idk*

Tommy: *call?*

Tommy's phone starts ringing immediately, and he accepts the video call from Tubbo. Tommy couldn't fight the grin that spreads across his face even if he tried. The two of them greet each other before falling into easy small talk for hours. Tommy's never had a friend like Tubbo, and he never knew how nice it could be. Tommy's never really had anyone, ever. Tubbo's probably the first to break that rule.

But Tommy's sour mood comes back and ruins it.

That's the thing that sucks about being a foster kid, he's going to get kicked out and sent to the next family and he's not going to have this phone anymore because surely Phil will take it back. And even if he didn't, it's not like Tommy can pay for it.

He'll never get to see Tubbo again.

Tubbo will be nice about it, sure. He'll send Tommy emails at first, but Tommy will only be able to reply if the next family lets him on a computer, or to go to the library, or if he can sneak letters during school. Eventually, Tubbo will get tired of the lack of contact. He'll message less and less, until he stops all together. Tommy knows how this is going to go.

"Hey, sorry Tubbo," he says, chest feeling tight, "I actually gotta go. Talk to you later."

"Oh, okay!" Tubbo says, "that's--"

"Bye," Tommy replies, and he immediately hangs up.

He goes back to planning. Phil was nice to him this time, but there's got to be some way he can fuck up enough that even Phil will meet his wit's end. Tommy's mind goes immediately back to the rules of the house he was presented during his first week.

With some planning, and those rules in mind- along with a week's time to plan and spread things out- Tommy bounds down the stairs and twists down the hall that leads to Techno's room.

He smirks, just in front of the door before grabbing the handle, twisting it, and stepping right in. This'll be a big step up from what he last pulled, but Tommy's positive it's a necessary one. Phil gives him too many chances, but Tommy knows he'd never compromise his child's wellbeing over the foster kids. Who would?

"What are you doing," Techno demands, the minute he enters, sitting up from where he lies on his bed, book open above him.

"Borrowing a book," Tommy explains, walking over to Techno's bookshelf.

"No. Get out. I didn't say you could come in."

Tommy ignores him.

Techno hops off his bed, approaching Tommy.

"Get out," he says again, voice rising, "I didn't- you can't come in."

"Chill," Tommy brushes him off, "I'm just borrowing a book." Finally, he finds what he's looking for. It's easy to find considering instead of being wedged between the others, it's laid flat in front. Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War.' He reaches out, pulling it off the shelf.

"Don't touch that," Techno demands, hands clenching at his side, "Don't- put it back Tommy."

Tommy ignores him, fully sliding it off the shelf, holding it in both hands. Techno shivers at the act.

“Phil!” Techno shrieks, “PHIL!”

“Oh gotta call Phil to solve all your problems?” Tommy teases, turning to leave the room. He takes two steps before Phil’s at the door. Perfect timing.

“What’s going on?” he asks, studying the scene in front of him.

Techno flaps his hands desperately.

“He- Tommy- He can’t be here! He can’t touch my books!”

Phil looks from Techno, to Tommy, to the book. Techno’s favorite book. Techno’s special book. Techno’s comfort item. The one he always brings with him places and reads whenever things get to be too much. Tommy knows how important it is to him.

He’s not exactly sure why Techno is so connected to a dumb book, but that isn’t what matters. What matters is that Tommy can use this as a tool against Techno to get Phil mad enough to send Tommy away.

“Tommy, please give the book back to Techno.”

“No,” he says, still holding onto it.

“Phil!” Techno shrieks, rocking on his heels.

“Tommy. I’d like to clarify something here. You took Techno’s book- a comfort item- and entered his room without his permission, causing him intentional distress. Keyword being that this was an intentional decision on your part.”

“Yes,” Tommy agrees. He raises an eyebrow, awaiting the inevitable hammer.

“Alright,” Phil says, “if you’re not going to give the book back, can you please go wait in the kitchen?”

What? Why- Why isn’t Phil yelling? Tommy broke a rule! And he made Techno upset. Tommy had expected a little more than being let off scot-free.

“I, uh, okay,” he says weakly, stumbling away. This is not the outcome he was expecting. He leaves the room, walking down the hall to the kitchen. Unconsciously, he slides into his seat at the kitchen table, placing the book in front of him, and looking down at the cover. He can hear Techno screaming from down the hall, and notes Wilbur walking halfway down the stairs to see what’s going on.

Tommy catches his gaze for a moment, and Wilbur holds it, before dropping down to the book Tommy has. Tommy tilts it so Wilbur can get a good view, smirk settling across his face.

Wilbur's face immediately drops and he looks from the book, to Tommy, towards the direction of Techno's room where the sound of screaming still comes from. His eyes light up in realization before quickly darkening.

In an unusual display of aggression, Wilbur flips Tommy off before storming back upstairs to his room. Tommy watches him go, empty feeling settling inside of him.

Tommy thumbs open the book, and instantly notices the handwriting inside. On the back of the cover, tucked in a corner reads *'Happy Birthday Techno!, <3 Wilbur.'*

Tommy closes it with a bang, sour taste in his mouth and stomach feeling upset.

He sits there alone, kicking his feet underneath the table as minutes tick by.

What seems to be quite a bit later, Phil exits Techno's room and joins him at the kitchen table.

"Techno's going to join us in a few minutes and we're going to figure this out together," Phil explains. "But before he does so, I was hoping to ask you a few things."

Tommy keeps his head down, and swings his feet under the table.

"Why'd you do it?" Phil asks.

"Just wanted to borrow a book," Tommy mumbles.

"No," Phil says, "No that's not it."

Tommy shrugs.

"Okay," Phil says. "I'm lost. What led up to this? Did Techno do something?"

Tommy shakes his head.

"Was it something else?"

"Just wanted to borrow a book," Tommy repeats.

Phil falls silent for a moment too long.

"Tommy," he says, voice hanging in the air like smoke, "Is this about me asking if you wanted to be adopted?"

Tommy freezes, feet stalling in their movement and heart dropping to his stomach. His fingers scrape against the table, hands curling into balls.

"I just wanted to borrow a fucking book!" he protests.

"Okay," Phil says, playing along, "Okay. Well then why don't you give that one back to Techno, and we can go get you your own at the bookstore right now. Or if you just want it for a little bit, we can go to the library. Grab your coat and we can go."

He's fucking caught, and they both know it. Tommy doesn't move.

"That was a mean thing to do," Phil eventually adds, "Techno is very hurt."

Tommy grits his teeth as a lump forms in his throat, choosing silence once more.

Phil lets him sit in the silence.

A minute later and Techno joins them.

His hair is messy, pulled back in a ponytail instead of it's usual braid or bun. It's still wet, meaning Techno took a shower. His eyes are red and swollen, and he's still sniffing as he rocks back and forth in his chair and shakes out his hands.

"Okay," Phil says, "I think we can work this out?" he asks them both.

"I need my book back," Techno blurts instantly, looking down at the table as he continues to shake his hands. Tommy takes a look at him, noting his obvious distress. This was the exact result that Tommy was trying to get. It should feel like success, but all Tommy feels is a sinking weight in his chest.

Techno's always seemed like a strong, intimidating force. His foster brothers balance each other out; Wil with his softness, Techno with his hardness. They're a perfect pair. They don't need a third.

Today though, it seems like their roles have switched, with a vulnerable Techno weeping before him and an angry Wilbur flipping him off moments ago.

"Whatever," Tommy says, "looks like a boring book anyways." He stands, chair sliding back and screeching against the floor. Techno flinches and covers his ears.

Tommy stalks out of the room, and up the stairs, leaving the book behind on the table. No one calls after him.

He continues past Wilbur's open door, not even pausing even as the older boy calls after him and jumps to his feet.

He's in his own room, about to close the door when Wil slides into the doorway.

"What the hell did you do?" Wilbur asks.

"Nothing," Tommy snaps, "Just wanted to borrow a fucking book. God I can't do anything in this house."

Wilbur stares at him, and Tommy slams the door in his face.

He flops on his bed, and considers what he just did.

Phil's gotta hate him now. And Techno and Wilbur both definitely do.

Good.

There's pain, a pressure stabbing directly in his chest as he realizes he's completely destroyed the relationship he's formed with the three of them. It hurts, but it's good.

It's good because they've finally realized how much of a fuck up Tommy is.

Phil even admitted it.

'That was a mean thing to do.'

Tommy huffs, rolling over on his bed and tries not to cry. He has no reason to after all.

All he needs to do now is wait until Phil makes his decision and sends him packing.

Chapter End Notes

I've said it before and I'll say it again. Things get worse before they get better.

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

[encompass: the sandbox](#): encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

[encompass: behind the scenes](#): an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

tipping point

Chapter Summary

Well... fucking with Techno didn't work. Guess he's going to need to take it a step further. But first, Tommy needs to do some reconnaissance.

Chapter Notes

CW: self-hatred, self-sabotage, mentions of shitty parents, mentions of dead parent, the fuckedness that comes with the foster system, mentions of periods, mental health issues, briefly referenced past self harm, family issue/struggles

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy knows he's walking on eggshells but a week passes, and while Phil continues trying to have a couple more conversations with him, Tommy brushes him off, spending all of his time either out of the house, or in his room.

One of the few times Tommy doesn't stay in the room, he runs into Wilbur and Techno heading towards the bathroom, numerous items in their hands.

Tommy gives them an odd look, but neither of them spare him a glance, Wilbur laughing at something Techno must have said.

Tommy moves past them, to downstairs where he had planned on grabbing some pretzels and to grab his school book that he had left downstairs.

Snack quickly retrieved and 'The Crucible,' in hand, he races back upstairs.

The bathroom door is open when he passes it and he sees Wilbur standing and Techno sitting with his head leaned back. Before either of them can see him, he darts past.

But Tommy's curiosity gets the better of him and instead of slipping into his own room, he sits in the hallway, back pressed against the door, just out of sight of the bathroom.

He can't see them, of course, but he can hear them.

"Are you almost done?" Techno huffs.

Wilbur laughs.

“No,” he says, “Tech, we just started.”

Techno’s distinct huff makes it to him, and Tommy also hears a faint tapping.

“It smells bad,” Techno complains.

“We’re dyeing your hair Techno, what do you think it was going to smell like? You’ve done this a million times.”

Oh. So that’s what they’re up to. I mean, it makes sense. Techno’s hair is obviously dyed with the bright pink color it is. Tommy just... hadn’t thought about it. But now that he thinks about it, he had noticed the brown roots that had steadily started to appear in his hair.

“Smells bad,” Techno complains again.

“You’re shaking a lot,” Wilbur comments, “It takes longer when you shake.”

“Tough luck,” Techno says.

Wilbur laughs again. Tommy thinks it’s one of the sounds he hears most in this house. It’s certainly not a bad thing.

“No it’s fine,” Wilbur confirms, “Stim all you want. Just letting you know it will take longer.”

“Hmm.”

Tommy doesn’t know why he’s here, why he’s listening in on them do a mundane thing like redyeing hair. But he continues to stay, listening in.

“Want me to braid it after?” Wilbur asks.

“No. Dad has to braid it after it’s dyed. But you can help if you want. Or braid it another time.”

There’s mostly silence after that for a few minutes, and Tommy considers going back to his room. But then Techno’s voice breaks through once more, and Tommy has no choice but to stay.

“What do you think about Tommy?” Techno says.

He freezes where he is, heart pounding.

“What do you mean?”

“Like the other day. He took my copy of ‘The Art of War.’”

“I know,” Wilbur agrees.

“I didn’t like that.”

“I know,” Wilbur agrees.

“Why’d he do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hmm.”

Tommy waits for them to say more on the subject of him, but they don't. Instead, they go back to murmurs and bickering. Techno complains over the dye job and Wilbur jokingly threatens to quit and tells him to go to a salon. That stops Techno’s complaints, but not his grumbles.

“What’s up with you?” Techno asks, “You’ve been weird lately.”

“Wow, thanks,” Wilbur bites back, but it’s light- teasing.

“No I mean...” Techno goes quiet for a minute and Tommy drums his fingers on his knee. “Your anxiety has seemed worse lately.”

"I got my period again," Wilbur offers, "that always sends my whole body into a funk, not to mention my mental state. Image bleeding for a week straight. Except with me I don't even know how long I'll be bleeding or when the hell I'll get it. Throw in already imbalanced hormones with something that messes with your hormone levels and it isn't exactly a fun time."

Wilbur can get periods? Tommy hadn't known that.

Techno hums.

"Is that it?" Techno asks, "it seems... more than that?"

Wilbur chuckles, but it’s weak and unlike his usual laugh. Tommy frowns. He knows Wilbur has anxiety, obviously, and he knows he’d been anxious around midterms, but hasn’t he been doing better?

“Yeah I-” Wilbur sighs, “Promise you won’t tell dad?”

“No.”

Wilbur laughs.

“Okay, promise you won’t tell dad as long as I’m not like... doing something illegal or hurting myself again?”

Okay. Okay. What the hell is going on? Wilbur’s hiding something from Phil. That’s- well Tommy can relate. He’s hidden lots of things from his foster families but Wilbur’s adopted, he’s Phil’s kid, what does he feel he still has to hide?

Phil, well he’s seemed great so far but Tommy’s been wrong before.

And that's not even opening the can of worms that is Wilbur apparently hurting himself in the past.

"Alright," Techno agrees, pulling Tommy out of his thoughts and back to the conversation at hand.

"I didn't apply to university."

"What? Wilbur?"

"I know, I know, I just.. It's university is this huge step and I was barely handling my classes and it's a lot of work and I don't know if it's what I want so-"

"Wilbur, deep breath."

Tommy can hear the harsh inhale and exhale even from where he is.

"So yeah," Wilbur finishes lamely.

"I- you know you could tell Dad, right?"

"I know."

"Then... why haven't you?"

Tommy scoots a tiny bit closer to the door, trying to make sure he catches everything he can. But before Wilbur has a chance to finish, Tommy hears footsteps coming up the stairs.

As quickly and quietly as he can, Tommy pulls himself away and to his room, missing the rest of their conversation. He pulls out his DS to have something to do, but ignores his game, instead reflecting on the conversation he had overheard.

But nothing really comes from that, because Techno's still avoiding him. He feels awkward and out of place in the house, and his room starts to feel confining.

He hangs out with Tubbo more and more, spending time at his house instead of his foster home. Tubbo obviously notices, but he doesn't really push it. Or well, he gives Tommy space for a bit.

But then...

"What's up?" Tubbo asks, "You've been acting weird lately."

A strange wave of deja vu hits him. Where has he heard those words before?

"You're weird," Tommy remarks, focusing on the game they're playing instead. Tubbo huffs as Tommy kills him, and he lets the game sit on the waiting screen rather than restarting.

"You going to start?" Tommy asks.

Tubbo hesitates, but presses play.

“I just- I’m- I care about you Tommy, y’know that, right?”

Tubbo says it with such earnesty, such clarity that it's hard not believe him. For a long time Tommy’s refused to listen when people said they care. He learned the hard way that it was a lie time and time again.

But this time, this time Tommy genuinely believes it. Which is one of the reasons that makes this so much harder.

“I haven’t really had a lot of friends, y’know,” Tubbo shares quietly, “I was never, y’know... People used to call me f-slur a lot cause I wasn’t super masculine and cried- cry- a lot. They don’t really anymore cause people just don’t care enough about me anymore.

“Honestly, I don’t think the name calling hurt me all that much? It was mostly stupid stuff. Like I didn’t want to be friends with those kids anyways, y’know?”

Tommy listens and doesn’t reply. He’s not sure what to say, he keeps on playing the game, fingers moving across the controller and legs bouncing at his side.

“It’s nice to have a friend who isn’t an asshole,” Tubbo admits, “I dunno, you’re genuine and stuff and that’s really nice.”

A strange feeling washes over Tommy and he hears faint buzzing in his ears. His body feels like pins and needles and his brain is full of static. His hands shake on the controller and his leg still bounces. A moment later and it all ends.

“Thanks,” Tommy chokes out, “You’re not exactly bad yourself.”

They continue to fuck around, challenging each other continually each time the other wins. They’re fading down for the day, laughing more and playing less when Tommy considers opening up.

Tubbo’s always been open with him, he notes. The vulnerability he’s shown is something Tommy’s never experienced before. And like Tommy is Tubbo’s first friend, Tubbo is Tommy’s.

Plus, most important of all, Tommy finds himself wanting to share.

“Things have been weird,” Tommy admits.

“Yeah?” Tubbo asks.

“Yeah,” Tommy agrees, wondering how to continue. “It’s uh... Phil’s isn’t my first home, y’know. And I always- I never end up staying.”

Tommy never talks about being fostered. It’s kind of a taboo thing for how impactful it is in his life. At Phil’s all he can ever think about is being a foster kid. With Tubbo, outside of Phil’s and away from Techno and Wilbur, he doesn’t want to be reminded of him.

“You mentioned something about always messing up,” Tubbo admits. It's a slight probe, Tommy recognizing it as an intro to a deeper topic.

Tommy sighs, and nods. He's ready to share.

“What uh, what did you mean by that?” Tubbo asks.

Tommy shrugs.

“I dunno,” he admits, “I- I’m not exactly the ideal child y’know? Like I’m loud and I can’t pay attention and I talk back. That shit. Foster parents don’t want a kid like that.”

Tubbo goes quiet for a moment. The silence lasts long enough that Tommy looks over, heart starting to beat a little faster as he waits for his friend’s reply.

“That, that just sounds like a teenager to me? I do all of that stuff to. My mum always gets upset with me when I don't do my chores. But I don't get kicked out for stupid things like that.” Tubbo says.

Tommy shrugs.

“It different,” he insists, “like sure, teenagers do that, but I’m.. I’m worse, y'know? I can’t seem to get shit right.”

“...Tommy that doesn’t... Are you sure it was your fault?”

Tubbo stops playing the game, letting Tommy's character hit him all he wants as he turns to Tommy with a frown.

“Yeah,” Tommy says, and that’s that. He sighs loudly, and puts down the controller he’s holding onto but not playing with anymore, matching Tubbo.

“It’s- I wanted to tell you though. Because I uh- I don’t think I’m going to be here much longer.”

Tubbo jerks his head, wide eyes catching Tommy’s.

“What? You’re leaving?”

Tommy shrugs.

“I- It always happens,” he says, “And I think...” he trails off.

“Oh,” Tubbo says. The sadness is apparent on his face and Tommy does his best to keep his own blank.

And that’s that.

And nothing majorly changes.

He doesn't get kicked out. Phil doesn't even approach him about getting kicked out. It isn't even a conversation.

Tommy realizes once more that he needs to up his game.

So he starts to scheme. It takes time, he hangs in the back studying the family dynamic and figuring out where he can wriggle in and shake things up just enough.

There's something up with Techno that's for sure, Tommy doesn't know exactly what's eating at him, so it makes it hard to figure out how to use it. He feels a bit guilty about prying into Techno's business just to figure out a way to use it and get himself kicked out, but it's all he really had to work with.

Something's up with Techno, something's been up with him since Tommy found him yelling at Phil that one time. Phil and him aren't actively fighting- honestly if anything they seem closer- but Tommy can tell something's up.

Maybe it's the fact that Techno disappears to his room quicker than he used to, or that half the times conversations that involve him get only huffs in reply. Maybe it's the fact that Tommy could hear him screaming two nights ago, or maybe it's the fact that Wilbur doesn't tease him as much. Or maybe it's because Tommy's used to everything falling apart at some point and he's used to collecting all these little signs before things go south.

But something's up, and it leaves Tommy on edge. Maybe it wasn't the smartest idea to go after Techno when something was already up with him. Don't add more fuel to the fire, y'know?

He can't exactly ask Techno about it considering Techno probably hates him right now, so instead he cautiously reaches out to Wilbur.

Wilbur hasn't exactly tried to spend a ton of time around him ever since he took Techno's book, but he also doesn't actively avoid Tommy, so it's probably a fair bet.

"Hey Wil?" Tommy asks one day when he's bussing dishes from the table and Wilbur's rinsing them and putting them in the dishwasher.

"Hmm?"

Tommy pauses, wondering if he really wants to risk it. Whatever. He takes a breath and goes for it.

"Uh, is Techno... What's up with Techno?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, ever since that fight with Phil..." Tommy trails off, hoping that Wilbur will pick up and answer his question before he has to keep explaining.

"Oh. That."

Yeah that.

But Wilbur falls silent and Tommy starts to think he's not going to get any response.

Wilbur sighs.

"It's- well I don't know if it's really mine to share. It's probably better to ask Techno about it."

"You really think Techno's going to talk to me about it?" Tommy asks with a snort. Wilbur's got to be aware of that, right?

And it seems like he is because Wilbur doesn't continue talking, instead giving a pursed frown. He scrubs a bit more aggressively at the dish he's holding before setting it into the dishwasher.

"Well," he hedges, "That's kind of- well..."

Well Tommy asked for it. He knows where Wilbur's going with this.

"Techno's- it's- y'know he likes his space," Wil says, "And you know that. And you know the house rules. And you.. Well you did it anyway."

Yeah, he had. That had been Tommy's exact plan. It's also why he can't ask Techno. Usually he wouldn't mind, it's not exactly like he wants to bond with people he's going to never see again soon enough.

But, this time Tommy needs to know. He needs to know because Techno's acting weird and Phil's acting weird and everyone's acting weird and Tommy can't stand not knowing where he lies in the dynamics.

He's thrown off and frustrated and on edge. And he'd never, never admit it. But he's... he's scared.

But he can't exactly tell Wil that.

"It's just..." Tommy starts, "I- well. All of you know what's up and I don't and it's- I don't- He-"

He cuts himself off with a frustrated huff. He doesn't know how to go about convincing Wil without revealing more than he'd like.

Wilbur stops scrubbing the dish he's on, actually putting it down. Tommy notices out of the corner of his eye, and tenses slightly, not knowing why he stops. Tommy brings a pan over to the sink where the rest of the dishes are, but when he moves away to grab one of the final plates, Wilbur reaches out, barely missing grabbing onto his arm and pulling away instead.

Tommy jerks away and stares at him.

“Sorry,” Wil says. He sighs, “I guess- I mean you’re right. We all know, and you don’t- it’s. Well I can’t tell you a lot. But it’s just some shit with his parents.”

Tommy frowns.

“His parents?” he asks.

Wil nods.

Tommy blinks, taken aback. It’s not like he hasn’t been curious about Techno’s family. It’s one of those things in the system that becomes so repetitive and familiar that it’s commonplace, but it’s also such a big part of being in the system it’s weird not thinking about it. But at this point, Tommy knows better than to ask.

He had kinda thought Techno’s parents were dead. A lot of the kids with parents that are still alive talk about how they’ll finally come back to them, either they realize they never wanted to leave them in the first place or they got their shit together enough that they can get their kid back. The other set of kids whose parents are alive tend to be angry, to complain, They’re the lot that have living parents but they’re so shit they’ve lost all hope at getting them back. Deadbeat, abusive, they came in all shapes and sizes.

Tommy hasn’t had to deal with that shit thankfully. His parents are dead, plain and simple. Or well his mom is. Who knows who his dad was. Wilbur’s in the same boat, and because Techno hadn’t ever talked about his parents, Tommy assumed he was also part of the dead parents club. Apparently not.

So which are they? Deadbeat? Abusive? Or ruled unfit at the time?

It’s probably not the last, Phil wouldn’t have been able to file the adoption papers unless Techno’s parents had released custody of him.

“Deadbeat or abusive?” Tommy asks.

“What?” Wilbur says.

“So which were they, Techno’s parents, deadbeat or abusive?” Tommy repeats.

Wilbur gives him an odd look before pulling away and goes back to dishes.

“Neither,” he says.

Something about how he says it has Tommy not asking for any follow up. He’s overstepped something, the edge in Wilbur’s tone is proof of that. But Tommy doesn’t know what.

He’s pushed a lot already, he should drop it.

So however much he doesn’t want to drop it, he does.

Tommy pushes Techno’s weird behavior to the back of his mind and goes back to planning on what he could do to get Phil to send him packing.

Skipping school didn't work. Targeting Techno didn't work. But maybe, maybe if he changes his tactics slightly, uses Wilbur, doesn't even bring in Phil...

Like that he has a solid plan to get kicked out. There's no way Phil'll let him stay once he finds out.

Tommy ducks into the bathroom and opens the medicine cabinet, passing over his own deodorant in favor of Wil's, and grabbing the bright orange prescription bottle that sits next to it. He quickly slips it into his pocket, and exits the room. He makes sure to keep it near, knowing that when Wilbur eventually notices, he has to be ready.

Chapter End Notes

Just a little longer. A little longer. I promise all of the pain will be worth it.

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

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[encompass: the sandbox](#): encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

[encompass: behind the scenes](#): an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

self fulfilling prophecy

Chapter Summary

Tommy took Wilbur's meds. There's only a few ways this can play out.

Chapter Notes

CW: mentions of past self harm, self-sabotaging, panic attack, antidepressant med withdrawal, threats, self-worth issues, general shittiness of the foster system, mentions of dead parents, mentions of alcoholism and Not Great Parents, frustrations, safety risks/issues, mentions of bugs and spiders, manipulation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sunday morning- the next day- there's a knock on his door.

"Tommy?" Wilbur calls.

Tommy brightens instantly, grabbing the orange bottle from the first drawer in his desk. He places it on top, making sure it's on clear display from the door, and then opens the door.

"Yeah?" he asks.

"Have you seen..." Wilbur trails off, eyes going to Tommy's desk. Perfect.

"Are those my meds?" Wilbur asks.

"Yeah," Tommy says.

"Tommy I need those."

Tommy shrugs, "You're not going to die. I looked 'em up."

He did no such thing, but if Wilbur really did need them that bad, Tommy thinks it would be pretty obvious.

"Seriously Tommy?" Wilbur says, "Do I need to go grab Phil?"

"Tell Phil and I'll tell him you didn't submit any of your college apps."

Wilbur's face drains of all colors.

“How did you know that?” he asks.

“You’re a shit liar,” Tommy says. Wilbur doesn't need to know about his eavesdropping.

Wilbur looks to the pill bottle, to Tommy, to the pill bottle before huffing and storming back to his room.

Success.

Honestly, Tommy’s not exactly sure where this is going to go. But it’s going nowhere good and the longer that Phil doesn’t know, the worse his reaction will be when he finds out. And then Tommy will be booted for sure.

He takes the time to hide the pill bottle, just in case Wilbur breaks one of the house rules and goes looking for it. He wonders what Prozac’s for anyways.

So he plays the waiting game. He set his end game move, now he has to hang on until it goes into play.

He sits in his room, knowing that all of this won’t be much longer. He’s half playing on his beat up DS, stuck more in his thoughts as he loses focus on the actual gameplay.

He catches a flash of pink out of the corner of his eye and looks up from where he’s slouched at his desk. Techno stands at his door, hair pulled up in a ponytail and running shoes already on. The two of them stare at each other for a minute. Tommy’s frozen and Techno stays, hovering in his door frame.

Tommy takes a small breath. After he took Techno’s book, there’s no way he’d still want Tommy to go running with him, right? There’s... he’s not going to ask. Tommy doesn’t deserve the kindness, the care.

Techno continues to stand there for a moment longer, tense air between them. Tommy feels it sharply and he knows while Techno’s often oblivious to emotions, he has to be feeling the tension as well.

“Never mind,” Techno practically spits out, and then disappears from Tommy’s door.

Tommy immediately feels like what little energy he has left has been completely sucked from him. He slouches even further. He knows now, he knows. He doesn’t belong here. Any doubt that he had that this time things would be different completely disappears from his mind.

He considers the pill bottle he took from Wil.

It sucks, that it has to be this way. Tommy thinks he might even miss this family. He will genuinely miss Tubbo.

If only it didn't have to be this way.

Things stay tense between Tommy and each of the members of this stupid hodge podge family. Phil’s the only one who isn’t actively avoiding him, but Tommy’s making it even by

avoiding Phil. He does his best to isolate himself.

For some reason, even though things are obviously off, Phil doesn't restrict Tommy from anything. He doesn't take away Tommy's phone, or ever enter his room without permission. He still lets Tommy hang out with Tubbo (even though those times are becoming less and less) and go outside.

Tommy does what he can with this, spending hours outdoors to escape the crushing feeling of being in the house. He tends to either be outdoors walking, or holed up in his room. Both places mean people don't try to talk to him, which is exactly what he wants.

He isn't lonely. He isn't.

He can't escape every interaction though, and the most frequent one's he gets stuck in are the car rides home from school. Wilbur always attempts to ask Techno and him about their days, and it's not like Tommy can just leave the conversation. He's not at the point of jumping out of cars to escape this stupid family.

At least Wilbur's running late today. The worst is when Tommy and Wilbur meet up first, waiting for Techno to eventually appear after the crowd. But Tommy's at the spot and there's still no Wilbur, or Techno.

A small part of him worries that they left without him, but he quickly brushes the thought away. Wilbur's a softie, even if he is talking to Tommy less- which is what he wanted- he still has been generally kind.

So Tommy waits, and a few minutes later Techno appears.

He walks straight past Tommy, in the direction of the lot.

"Let's go," he says, peering back at Tommy for less than a millisecond.

Not wanting to get left behind, Tommy grabs his bag and races after Techno, quickly making up the lost ground.

"What about Wilbur?" Tommy asks.

"Went home early," Techno mumbles as they approach the car. Unlike usual, Techno takes the front seat, Tommy hesitantly grabbing shotgun.

They start the journey home, and Tommy wonders which is worse- Wilbur's insistent questions about their days or the thick silence that follows Techno. Tommy shifts in his seat.

Techno hums at his side. The action has Tommy recognize his own bouncing leg, the little ways both Techno and him stim. This is the first house he's been comfortable stimming in, and he's not alone in doing it. He forces his leg to stop, and looks out the window instead.

"Hey, has Wilbur said anything to you lately?"

Tommy lifts his head up, frowning at the fact that Techno is actually attempting to converse with him.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

Techno sighs, shrugs, and then frowns.

“I don’t know. Has he- you think he’s doing okay?”

“Why the fuck wouldn’t he?” Tommy grumbles.

His response immediately makes Techno scowl.

“Whatever,” he says, “Don’t know why I expected you to care.”

The words sting, little tiny pricks sticking into him all across his body. Tommy turns away, back to the window, and Techno focuses on the road.

Fuck this. Can’t they hurry up with this whole kicking Tommy out thing? He’s feeling shittier by the minute.

And just when things can't get worse, they do.

April 9.

He comes home to a banner that reads 'Happy Birthday,' hanging in the living room. There's balloons around the table and a box that suspiciously looks like it would hold a cake on the table. There's numerous presents at Tommy's seat as well.

"What?" he asks.

"Happy birthday," Phil greets.

"Oh. Right."

He'd- well he hadn't forgotten per say but he had pushed into the back of his mind. And now here they are celebrating him. Celebrating him after he skipped school and took Techno's book and stole Wilbur's meds. And they have a banner, and present, and cake. All for him.

Wilbur and Techno don't even look overly upset to be celebrating him, give him warm smiles.

He takes one final look and storms off to his room.

Phil tries to follow, knocking on his door and speaking softly. Tommy tells him to leave, and his voice eventually fades.

The decorations stay up for a few days, and Phil makes sure to offer him cake.

Tommy continues to refuse the offerings and ignores all of it. When handed presents, he doesn't bother opening them and instead shoves them into a corner in his room.

He doesn't want their shit, and soon enough they're going to realize they don't want him either.

"Tommy," Phil calls softly into his room one evening.

"What Phil," he grumbles back.

"Can I come in?"

Tommy flops over on his bed, hugging one of his pillows closer to his chest. He thought he'd be happier now, knowing that this was all almost over, that he'd get sent back and things would be normal again. But alas, he's gotten soft from this stupid house, this stupid family. He needs to toughen up. Other houses won't be this kind.

"No," he says.

"Alright," Phil says, and his door stays closed.

"Tommy," Phil starts up again, from the other side of a closed door. Something deep inside Tommy turns and he wishes with all of his might that Phil would go away. That Phil would give him back, send him away.

They always do.

It's what he wants, Tommy convinces himself. It'll be better this way. He knows it will be.

"Tommy," Phil repeated, "I don't know what's going on right now, but I want you to know that I care about you, and you have a home here, alright? If you ever need to- if you ever want to, you can talk to me. I'm here to listen."

Tommy listens as Phil talks, and refuses to admit that a tear falls from his face. He wipes it away, chalking it up to an irritated eye.

"And if you won't talk to me, can't talk to me, we can find someone who will, okay? A therapist, a program, or even just other outlets if you need them. I'm here to support you Tommy, I want the best for you. But to do that, I need you to let me in."

Tommy knows he isn't talking about the closed door between them.

"I love you, Tommy," Phil states, clear even through the walls.

Phil says those things, tries to be nice, but he doesn't get it. He doesn't get it. He doesn't want Tommy, because Tommy is a bad kid, a bad person. And he's going to prove it.

He doesn't know why Phil pretends to care so much. It's not like he could ever understand what Tommy's going through.

"He doesn't get it," Tommy insists one afternoon while doing dishes with Wilbur. Wilbur had started the conversation, asking him to be a bit nicer to Phil.

"He doesn't get what it's like, fucking has it all," Tommy insists.

Wilbur rolls his eyes.

"What? Was Phil also in the system? Does he have a fucking bleeding heart to try and save every child because he never was?"

Wilbur stays silent, looking away.

"Yeah that's what I thought," Tommy snaps back, "so leave me alone with that 'Phil understands' bullshit."

"Phil's parents were alcoholics," Techno speaks up. Tommy almost drops the plate he's putting in the dishwasher, not having realized he had entered the room.

Techno stands at the kitchen entrance, leaning against the archway to the rest of the house.

"So?" Tommy says.

"So they were shit parents," Techno says, "yeah maybe they didn't beat him or refuse to feed him, but they yelled at him 24/7 and blamed all their problems on him. And then they fucking drove drunk and ended up six feet under."

Tommy's hands shake as he grabs the next dish. Techno's words have a venom to them, but Tommy refuses to let him see the effect it has on him.

"So no, Phil doesn't get the foster system," Techno admits, "but he does get not having a family. He gets wanting people to love you. So maybe step back a bit and don't be a dick, alright?"

"Whatever," Tommy mutters.

They're only halfway done with the dishes, but Tommy leaves mid process, escaping to his room as quickly as he can. Wilbur and Techno both shoot glares after him.

Techno's words echo in his head and Tommy can't help but feel a heavy weight fall in his chest. He considers his actions, how he had talked about Phil, how he plans to be trouble on purpose. He thinks about what he learned about Phil's own history and realizes he doesn't know much about anything to do with this family.

They're- they care about one another and for all his attempts, that's still Tommy doesn't understand. He wishes he did. But he doesn't. So he carries on.

He starts interacting with everyone less, staying in his room more if that's even possible. Techno already stopped inviting him on runs, so he's good there. He already stopped chilling with Wilbur in his room when he first stole his meds, so he has nothing to take care of on that front.

Tubbo can tell something's up, especially after their talk, and he asks him about it on occasion. Tommy tends to either brush it off or bite back, and Tubbo eventually learns not to

ask.

In fact, Tubbo starts talking to him less in general. He still hangs out with Tommy and they eat lunch every day together, but Tubbo stops asking for help on his English homework, stops sharing his new game ideas, and stops actively searching for Tommy during passing period.

Tommy's thinking about this with a frown when Wilbur jerks the car to the side as he is cut off by someone speeding in front of him.

Tommy gets thrown into his seatbelt and rebounded to his seat, stunned. Stupid fucking car, don't they know basic road safety? At least Wilbur knows what defensive driving is.

But instead of carrying forward, Wilbur continues to lean the car to the right, turning on his lights to change lanes.

"Wil?" Techno asks as Wilbur pulls over and stops the car, breathing heavily.

"Wil?!" Techno repeats.

Wilbur unbuckles his seat belt and tilts his head back gasping for air.

"Fuck," he says, "fuck. Can't fucking breathe."

"Hey Will, you're alright," Techno insists, "You can breathe, it just feels like you can't. Come on, take a deep breath in with me."

Wilbur nods, shakily taking a breath and only getting partially there before coughing and dissolving into gasps.

"Tech, Tech, I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I think somethings wrong."

"You're having a panic attack. You've had these before, you know what they are," Techno explains, his voice the closest to gentle as Tommy's ever heard it. "It feels like you can't breathe, but you are capable of it."

"I can't!" Wilbur gasps, starting to sob, "This- I think I'm dying."

"Okay. That's alright. You're not dying. Just try to breathe with me. In."

Wilbur sucks in, faltering once more and dissolving into more wheezing and tears.

Tommy watches as he struggles to breath, eyes wide and not knowing what to do. Techno stays relatively calm, even as his fingers tap a pattern on his leg. He continues to try and get Wilbur to breathe deeply and Wilbur continues to struggle. It takes a good fifteen minutes for them to get any sort of rhythm going and another ten for Wilbur to stop crying.

"Hey, you're alright," Techno continues to soothe, rubbing circles into Wilbur's back with his hand. "you're okay now. You're alright," he repeats.

Wilbur shuts his eyes and nods.

"Yeah," he says, "yeah. Yeah I'm okay."

"That was a pretty bad one," Techno notes, "have you taken your meds the last few days? Consistently?"

"That's what those are for?" Tommy blurts out, a sinking feeling appearing in his stomach.

"Not now Tommy," Techno cuts him off, and Tommy cringes away.

"Yeah," Wilbur lies, "yeah. I'm- yup. Took them."

Jesus is Wilbur bad at lying, but Techno seems to be even worse at telling when someone's lying because he nods and accepts the answer.

"Want me to drive home?" Techno asks.

Wilbur nods, and they switch spots.

They're only a few minutes away from home, but by the time Techno parks in the driveway, Wilbur is out cold in the passenger's seat.

Techno carefully wakes him, and Wilbur stumbles inside and heads straight up the stairs, most likely for a nap.

Phil watches him go, and immediately pounces as Techno follows Tommy in, carrying both his and Wilbur's bags.

"What happened?" Phil asks.

"Car cut us off and he had a really bad panic attack," Techno explains.

"Are you both alright?" Phil immediately asks, beginning to fret as he looks them over.

Tommy and Techno both nod.

"Okay, and Wil?"

"Physically? Fine. But Dad, it was a really bad panic attack. I haven't seen him panic that bad since before he went on his meds. But he says he's taking them."

Phil nods.

"I'll talk to him later," he says, "after he rests. We might need to move his psychiatrist appointment up."

Techno nods his head and acknowledgement, and splits off to his own room.

Tommy feels a little bit guilty. Just a little bit. That night he actually looks up what Prozac is.

He reads about what it actually does, the side effects, what happens when you go through withdrawal.

Each line he reads makes him feel worse, and worse, and worse.

He realizes he's only seen Wilbur's symptoms on meds and he has no idea how worse they could get off meds, much less how bad they could get with that sudden jump off. He had overheard Wilbur talking about hurting himself in the past. Could something like that happen again? Did something like that already happen again?

Had that been Tommy's fault?

With trembling fingers, he reaches out to his phone.

Tommy: *I fucked up.*

Tubbo: *how???*

Tubbo: *r u okay?*

Tommy: *I did a bad thing*

Tommy: *like a really bad thing*

Tubbo: *how bad???*

Tubbo: *scale of broke a pencli to killed sumone?*

Tommy: *an 8???*

Tommy: *i hurt wil*

Tommy: *like really bad*

The three typing dots pop up, appearing for a moment before disappearing.

Tubbo: *did u tell phil?*

Tommy: *no*

Tubbo: *tommy u need to tell phil if its that bad.*

Tommy: *hell kick me out*

Tubbo: *tommy, if u did sumthing that bad u need to tel him*

Tommy throws his phone down on his bed, getting up from his chair and pacing in his room.

He fucked up, he fucked up so bad. And Phil will kick him out which he guesses is what he wants but then why does he feel like shit?

His phone rings on the bed, vibrating slightly against the covers as Tubbo's name appears on the screen. He shuts it off, sits on his bed, folds his head into his hands, and cries silently.

He faintly hears footsteps racing up the stairs, and a door opens down the hall. There's voices talking- Phil and Wilbur- and Tommy knows he only has minutes now.

Tubbo said he needed to tell Phil. Tommy didn't tell Phil. He can't tell Phil because Phil will be disappointed. But Tommy hurt Wil, and now Tubbo knows and Tubbo likes him but...

But Tubbo's the kid in school who defends bees, who catches spiders in jars and releases them outside instead of stepping on them. Tommy knows that he's told Phil, and he knows Phil's first instinct will be to check on Wilbur.

Maybe, maybe, that's even what he wanted.

There's a knock on the door.

"Tommy," Phil calls softly, "Tubbo called me."

So this is the end, huh?

Chapter End Notes

So. We've reached the climax. how abt that.

(also a fuck ton of u had a lot of thoughts and predictions on how this would go down, anyone expect this?)

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the beginning of change

Chapter Summary

Guess it's time for a talk, huh?

Chapter Notes

CW: anxiety/panic, panic attack, guilt tripping, lying, manipulation, worries about being kicked out, shittiness of the foster system, self-hate, mentions of suicide, self-harm, and death, mentions of prison and terrorism

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tommy, we need to talk,” Phil calls, “You, me, and Wilbur.”

Tommy sighs and stands from his bed, brushing his pants off. He turns to his desk, reaching deep into the second drawer and pulling out the hidden pill bottle. He goes over to the door, opening it with his free hand. Phil looks at him, and then at the orange container he’s holding.

“Techno too,” Tommy mumbles, “You, me, Wilbur, and Techno.”

Phil blinks rapidly a few times, and Tommy’s stricken to find his eyes watering. Phil’s not crying, not quite, but his eyes are practically liquid.

“Let’s head down to the kitchen,” Phil says.

Tommy likes meetings in the kitchen. Most families have them in the living room, but there’s usually a couch and Tommy always gets an armchair and inevitably feels ganged up on. It doesn’t help that he usually is being ganged up on.

He doesn’t think he deserves a kitchen conversation. In reality they should probably move to the living room and Tommy should sit on the floor and they should all share a couch and yell themselves hoarse at him.

Then Tomy can pack up- if they even let him get his things- and move onto the group home before he goes to house 9. If he even gets a house 9 at this point. God knows he doesn’t deserve it.

All four of them sit at the table, Tommy forgoing his usual seat to sit at the opposite end, so each of them are on a different side. He holds out the orange container when no one says

anything, and slides it across the table towards the center, before pulling his hand back to his body.

“So...” he draws out, “I stole Wilbur’s drugs a few weeks ago.”

Neither Wilbur or Phil look at him, but Techno does, whipping his head towards Tommy and hissing out a dangerous, “What?”

Tommy hangs his head and pulls his shoulders to his ears.

Wilbur stares at the bottle for a good thirty seconds before reaching out and snatching up the bottle quickly.

Phil stands, delving deeper into the kitchen and pulling out a glass from a cupboard. Wordlessly, he moves over to the sink, filling it halfway. He returns to the table, placing the glass in front of Wilbur before taking his own seat.

“Dr. E says to take one now,” Phil tells him.

Wilbur nods, screws off the lid, taps one of the capsules into his hand, places it in his mouth, grabs the cup, raises it to his lips, drinks, and swallows.

“Okay,” Phil says, “Ground rules. No shouting, we’re going to talk about this, and if people start shouting we’re not going to get anywhere. If you need a break, say so. This is intended to be a helpful, productive conversation where we sort things out, not make things worse. Can we all agree to that.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur whispers.

Phil nods and turns his gaze to Tommy.

“Tommy?”

“Sure. Whatever,” he mumbles.

“No,” Phil says, “No. We don’t proceed with a ‘whatever.’”

Tommy studies the grains in the table before carefully lifting his gaze, meeting Phil straight on.

“Okay,” he chokes out.

Phil gives him a slight nod.

“Tech?”

Tech stays quiet, rocking back and forth in his chair as he twists his tangle in his hand.

“Tech?” Phil repeats.

"I'm thinking," he mutters. He continues to rock, the slight squeaking of the chair on the floor the only noise in the room. "Okay," he finally says.

"Okay," Phil agrees, "I'll be following the same guidelines. And note that throughout this, the most important thing is everyone's safety. I refuse to compromise on that matter, and I will pull authority as your legal guardian to ensure that safety is prioritized."

Phil let's that sink in for a moment, before nodding.

"Tommy," he eventually addresses, "You took Wilbur's meds."

"Yeah," he admits.

"Why?"

Why?

God what a fucking loaded question. Why did Tommy do it?

Because he needed Phil to kick him out. Because he's stayed here for half a year and he loves it, loves this family and never wants to leave. Because he's a fuck up, a screw up and it's not fair for Tommy to stay here and drag them all down and ruin their lives without them knowing. At least now they know.

Why?

Why, because he needed something big, something bold that was sure to get him kicked out. Detention hadn't worked, breaking a house rule and upsetting Phil's eldest adoptee hadn't worked. Why, because Tommy had seen the orange container his first morning there and it had struck that curious, impulsive, instinctive, corrupt part of his brain. Because it had poked and prodded and Wilbur was his last shot.

Because the meds had been there, and it was perfect timing and he had the perfect way to keep Wilbur quiet, and it was the perfect way to get kicked out.

"I... I had too," Tommy cries, "I had to! I had to! Because it's been six months and, and I'm still here! And you asked to adopt me and- and- and you can't! You can't adopt me because I'm a screw up and a fuck up and I'm a horrible person and I don't deserve you! I don't deserve a nice family and I don't deserve to be happy and I don't know how I tricked you into thinking you wanted to keep me, but, but you shouldn't! Cause I'm a bad kid and I took Wilbur's meds and now you know, you know now and that proves it! And now you gotta kick me out!"

All three of them stare.

"Oh Tommy," Phil sighs, "You're not getting kicked out."

Tommy's world freezes.

"What?" he hears himself say distantly.

“You’re not getting kicked out,” Phil says, “Wilbur and I talked, and I have considered sending you away for a little bit for everyone’s safety, but if that ever did happen, the plan would always be for you to come back here eventually if you wanted, to come home.”

“So you are sending me away?” Tommy asks.

“No,” Wilbur says.

“Wil,” Phil says.

“No. He’s not, it makes sense Phil.”

“Wilbur,” Phil says, this time with more force behind his words.

“He’s right,” Techno mutters, “Kid’s- Kid didn’t- he’s gotta stay Phil.”

They’re, they’re defending him? Even after he took Wilbur’s meds and made him freak out and go through withdrawal and suffer as his own brain waged wars in his head?

He doesn't understand. He doesn't get it. He doesn't deserve this.

“While I admire both of your resilience,” Phil says, “It’s not up to either of you.”

Wilbur and Techno both start protesting immediately.

“Let me finish,” Phil says. He turns away from Techno and Wilbur and instead to Tommy.

“Tommy. You need help. You need support. You- the things you said, about you being a bad person, about you being a fuck up, you believe that, yeah? You truly believe that you tricked us into thinking you were a good kid and you took Wilbur’s meds to show that you’re not.”

“Yeah,” Tommy says, voice like steel. He waits for the hammer that’s about to drop.

“Those things have names Tommy,” Phil says, voice much too gentle for someone who's about to send him away to an institution or some shit. “They’re called trauma responses and self-destructive tendencies.”

Okay. Alright. Tommy’s problems have names. Who fucking cares?

“And those are things you need to work on mate, because if you don’t, things are just going to get worse and you’re going to only hate yourself more. And Tommy, you’re a really wonderful kid and I hate for you to think so poorly of yourself.”

Tommy snuffles, wondering when on earth his face started leaking.

“But, I stole Wilbur’s meds,” he protests.

“Yeah, you did,” Phil agrees, “You did a bad thing Tommy. That doesn’t make you a bad person.”

A bad thing.

Not a bad person.

There's a difference?

"Now, if you're willing to work on that here- and when I say work on it, I mean seeing a psychiatrist and being in some sort of therapy support or treatment at minimum. If you do that, I'm more than happy to have you stay. If you're not willing to commit to that, we can begin looking at other options like live-away therapy programs or the like. What sounds good to you?"

"I- I get to choose?"

"So far, you haven't given me a reason to take that choice from you," Phil acknowledges, "Wilbur, Techno, and I all feel safe with you living here, and if you feel the same way and can commit to that, then that's more than okay. If you would prefer to leave, we can also discuss that."

"It's my choice?"

They still feel safe around him? After everything he's done?

"As long as the choice doesn't infringe on anyone's safety, yes."

"Okay," Tommy whispers. He clears his throat, and speaks from the heart. "Okay. I want to stay."

"Alright," Phil says, choked up, "alright. That sounds- that's great."

Tommy bursts into sobs, the tears continuing in flow as his whole body wracks with effort and pain. Phil begins to cry as well, much more gracefully, silver tears slipping down his nose and into the creases of his mouth that outline his smile.

For the first time in a long time, Tommy knows that everything is going to be okay.

But 'will be okay' doesn't mean things are okay, especially not instantly. He knows that.

"Phil," Wilbur cuts in after they've all sat in a moment of silence, "I didn't apply to university. At all. I lied about submitting my apps."

Phil frowns.

"What, why? I thought you were super excited to go to university."

Wilbur opens his mouth to speak, but before he gets a word out his lips start trembling. He looks down, taking a shaky breath as his eyes fill with tears.

"Will," Phil says softly and Wilbur bursts into tears. Phil's face falls and he looks close to tears himself.

"I'm sorry," Wil says, "I'm sorry. I know you wanted me to. I just- Phil it's only been a few years and I- I don't want to leave it in not ready to say goodbye. And I know I can visit and- I just- I don't want to go yet."

"Wilbur," Phil says again. He stands, taking a shaking breath and reaches over to Wilbur, who also stands. Phil holds him, rocking gently from side to side as Wilbur falls to pieces in his arms.

After a minute of heavy crying, Phil whispers a few words into Wilbur's ear. He nods and they hug for a minute longer as Wilbur's tears slowly stop.

When Wilbur's tears have completely dried, Phil and he both take their seats again. Even so, Phil continues to hold Wilbur's hand. Wilbur clings to it like a lifeline.

"Wilbur, I don't give a shit about university," Phil says, getting a small laugh out of Wilbur, and cracked smiles from Techno and Tommy.

"Wilbur your happiness, all three of your happiness is the most important thing in the world to me. If you don't want to leave yet, I'm not going to make you. Okay? We'll figure it out."

"Okay," Wilbur agrees, near a whisper. He sniffles and wipes his eyes quickly.

"I uh-" Tommy starts, before clearing his throat, "I said. I said I would tell you. If uh- if Wilbur said anything about his meds. That was- I shouldn't have done that."

Phil squeezes his eyes tightly shut.

"No," Phil says, "no, you should not have done that."

Tommy winces, chewing at his lip. Phil's upset. Phil's upset, and that's scary, but- but he has a right to be. Tommy really did fuck up. He did a bad thing, an awful thing and he really hurt Wilbur.

He doesn't know exactly why Wilbur takes the meds. He read that Prozac is most commonly used to treat depression and anxiety, but he doesn't know Wilbur's exact diagnosis. He knows about the anxiety, and he's understanding how bad things can get for Wil, but there's still much he doesn't know. He does know that going off these types of meds can send your mind through a mental loop.

He learned that even if you weren't before, you could be suicidal.

Tommy knows Wilbur used to hurt himself.

Tommy doesn't know a lot of Wilbur's history, doesn't know where he's at now, but what he does know is... well it's bad. The panic attacks already shook him to his core, but those are symptoms Tommy can see. He had no idea what's going on in Wilbur's head.

Wilbur could have died.

He could have... he could have legitimately died. Tommy could have killed him.

Tommy fucked up.

He's a bad person.

Or- or he did a bad thing.

Phil says that doesn't make him a bad person.

It's hard to believe.

"I- I'm going to do better," Tommy says. "For real. I am."

Phil nods at him.

"We'll start with a psychiatry appointment," he tells him, "get someone who fits you and see what they recommend."

The idea is mildly terrifying. But Tommy- Tommy needs help. He does. He knows he does. And he trusts Phil.

Phil cares about him. Tommy knows that.

He gives a hesitant nod and promises to try.

"If we're all sharing shit, I tried to see my mom," Techno admits.

Wilbur's head shoots out of Phil's neck for a second.

"Techno!" he scolds.

Tommy blinks. That's what has been going on with Techno?

"My parents are in prison," he explains, obviously for Tommy's benefit. "They're kinda terrorists. Or well they are terrorists. Or well my dad is definitely a terrorist my mom claims she doesn't know anything but also she helped with the bombs so... but they're minor terrorists. But they're still terrorists. So that's a thing. Um, yeah," Techno admits.

He bounces his leg on the floor and frowns at the table.

"And my mom kinda somehow got a letter to me? The voices got really bad again for a bit. They were super convincing. And I tried to visit her. Even though I shouldn't. And I won't now. But yeah, that happened. That's why I wasn't allowed by myself for a while a bit ago."

Tommy blinks at the explanation. He hates to say it because it simplifies Techno's entire story and explanation, but...

"That makes a lot of sense."

"Yeah, so we're all kinda fucked up," Techno says.

"None of us are fucked up," Phil insists, "I get that you're joking, but right now isn't the time for those types of jokes. None of us are fucked up. A little bit broken, maybe. Working on healing, absolutely. We're all going to work together to improve. We're going to work on not hurting ourselves," Phil gives a look to each and every one of them, "or anyone else," Tommy's the only to receive a look for that one.

"Okay? Can we commit to that?"

This time, the approvals are much easier to receive.

Tommy takes a breath, and commits to improving.

He starts therapy on a Tuesday. It's not as quick as he would have liked. At first he had been wary, cautious. He's gone to counselling before and that didn't end well. But Phil talks to him, explains what therapy is supposed to be, meant to be and Tommy's all for it.

It's a little embarrassing, but so worth it.

And it's nothing like he thought.

He goes twice a week to begin with. The first two sessions, the therapist just asks him about himself, and on the third, she asks him his biggest regret.

It's the easy question she's asked so far and he finds himself spouting out answer after answer as he's reminded of everything he's fucked up his entire life.

He talks about taking Wilbur's meds, about invading Techno's space, about texting Tubbo when he hurt someone, about how he attempted to manipulate Phil.

But he also talks about the time in fourth grade when he threw potato salad in a classmate's hair because the teacher kept praising her on how well she did in spelling tests. He talks about the time he stole a foster sibling's money and the time when he lit an ant on fire with a magnifying glass.

He talks about accidentally dropping a younger foster sibling and about stealing someone's present on Christmas.

He has so many regrets and they all come pouring out, one after another.

His therapist listens, and then asks him what his greatest accomplishments are.

His mind draws a blank.

What has he accomplished?

He gets therapy homework that day.

Task one is to write three apology letters to people he's hurt. He's not allowed to do Wilbur, Techno, Tubbo, or Phil yet, so he chooses three faceless examples from his past. He has an abundance to pick from.

That's the easy part.

The other thing he has to do is start a list of things he's proud of.

He spends hours staring at a blank page, sitting at his desk as he bounces his leg. He doesn't know a single thing he can write about.

At some point, Techno knocks on his door and Tommy calls back, saying he can enter.

Techno twists the door open, and stares over at Tommy as he steps a few feet through the doorway.

"Wanna go for a run?" he asks.

Tommy stops tapping his leg. It's the first time Techno's asked him to go on a run in weeks. They had gotten into a pattern of Tommy joining him every weekend, but that had quickly dissolved after they had their first falling out when Tommy barged into Techno's room.

"Yeah," Tommy says, "yeah. That sounds really good."

When he gets back, he pulls out the still blank sheet of paper and writes 'I went on a run with Techno.'

He works hard in therapy, works hard to improve and make amends and fix all the broken relationships he's helped destroy. He keeps pushing, and pushing, waiting for the day his therapist says that he can finally apologize to Wil, Techno, and Phil.

Don't get him wrong, Tommy's already apologized numerous times, but it's not enough. Tommy is learning that he can't just say he's sorry and expect things to change, he has to prove it and he has to mean it.

His therapist tells him that he has to learn to apologize and accept no forgiveness, and to be okay with that. That's the hardest part, because that's the part he can't control.

Tommy still doesn't get it.

But when Tommy arrives at his next therapy session, certain that he's finally going to work on apologizing to his foster family, his therapist hits him with a curve ball.

"We're going to take a break with making amends with other people," she says.

"What!" Tommy immediately protests, "but, I still need to work things out with Wil!"

She nods in agreement.

"I want to talk about something before we do that," she tells him, "I want to discuss apologizing to yourself."

"What?" he laughs, turning immediately defensive, "apologize to myself? What does that mean?"

“Well why did you take Wilbur’s meds?”

Tommy fidgets with a tangle and taps his leg.

“I already told you,” he hisses out, “I was trying to get kicked out.”

“And why did you want to be kicked out?”

“Cause I don’t deserve them.”

“Alright,” she says, “Well, have you ever considered that Wilbur or Techno don’t deserve to be adopted?”

Tommy whips his head up.

“What! No!” he exclaims.

“Okay- so why do you?”

Tommy hesitates.

“It’s different,” he insists, “I do bad things and get in trouble.”

“So if you get in trouble, you don’t deserve to be loved? To have a family.”

Tommy huffs.

“Well when you out it like that, it seems stupid.”

“Your thoughts and feelings aren’t stupid.”

“I know,” Tommy groans, “It’s just- I think. I think I was told for a long time that doing bad things made me a bad person, and that if I’m a bad person I don’t deserve love. And I think- I think I started to believe that and stopped trying to do good things.”

“That’s really insightful,” his therapist says. Tommy shrugs.

“I think it’s interesting,” she says, “how quick you are to defend Wilbur and Techno, but not yourself. I don’t think it’s fair to you. I think that you put a lot of pressure on yourself to be a good person, and you’re afraid that you won’t be one, so you intentionally hurt yourself and people around you.”

Tommy’s brain is fuzzy. It’s fuzzy, and like static and his breath comes out awkwardly through his throat. His finger’s hang loosely on the worn couch, and he strokes the cushion, feeling it give way beneath him. He breathes in shakily, and exhales. He can feel his breath flow all the way into his lungs and a cold feeling settles there. He clenches his toes.

“It doesn’t seem really fair,” she says, “to hold yourself to those standards. And I think that when we expect people to meet impossible standards, we can really hurt them.”

“Yeah,” Tommy whispers, “I’ve uh, I had a lot of families that did that to me.” He doesn’t say, ‘I’ve been doing that to myself for years.’

“So, if you held say, Wilbur or Techno to those standards, do you think you would owe them an apology.”

“...Yeah.”

“Okay, well then what makes you different.”

Tommy clenches his hands tightly together. He wants to fight, wants to scream. He wants to insist that he’s a bad person and not worth it and stupid and useless and he’s all these horrible things. He wants to say he’s rot, mold, an infection that can tear apart every living thing, creating mass destruction.

But he thinks of himself, and of the foster parents who had insisted those exact same things about him and then imagines them saying those things to Tech, to Wil, and his heart clenches.

He thinks of what it does, telling himself those things.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers out in a gasp, tears racing down his cheeks. It’s weird talking to himself in third person, because it’s so foreign, yet so personal, “Tommy, Tommy, I’m sorry.”

When Phil picks him up that day, he’s so exhausted he falls asleep in the car ride home. It’s the best type of exhaustion.

Chapter End Notes

and so it all starts to come together

ANNOUNCEMENT:

i have know this for a while now, but making it official. this will have a sequel.

~Cool Community Things to Check Out!~

[Encompass Sandbox Project](#): The official guide to the Encompass Sandbox Project- a project in which users are encouraged to take inspiration from the encompass series and create their own varying works of fiction from writing, to art, and so much more.

[encompass: the sandbox](#): encompass: the sandbox is the official collection for the Encompass Sandbox Project.

[encompass: behind the scenes](#): an insider look at everything that goes on in the encompass series. This series will feature Q&A, projects, plans, and other behind the scenes content.

and so it is

Chapter Summary

Tommy has a family. How about that, huh? He's the last person who would have guessed it.

Chapter Notes

TW: crying, screaming, breakdown, general shittiness of the foster system, auditory hallucinations, mentions of weed

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

June comes around and things aren't perfect, but then again Tommy's not really sure if he wants perfection. He wants- he wants communication, and he wants family. He wants forgiveness and responsibility. He wants, he wants- happiness isn't quite right, because he isn't always happy but- satisfaction. He wants satisfaction with his life, with his family, with his friends.

He wants to be content.

It takes a long time. They end up doing family therapy, all four of them, as well as splitting off into duos. Tommy has a few sessions with just Wil, focusing on their relationship, apologies, forgiveness, acceptance, and trust. He makes his amends.

And they work things out. Things are- things are okay and Tommy, Tommy for the first time in forever, feels at home.

Which of course is when everything goes wrong again.

Wilbur's playing guitar, singing something about doormats and Twitch chats that has Tommy peeking his head out and, after a moment, making his way to Wilbur's door.

The door's open, and Wilbur sees him, nodding him in with a bright smile.

Tommy returns it, and enters, grabbing the bean bag that he's slowly claimed as his spot in Wilbur's room.

Wilbur wears a loose hoodie, slightly thicker than his normal sweaters, most likely an excuse to get away without wearing a bra. Not that Tommy thinks anyone in the house particularly cares, but he knows Wilbur's a bit sensitive about it.

Another minute passes, Wilbur still singing gently, before Techno raps on the door. Wilbur gestures him in as well, and instead of taking his usual spot on Wilbur's bed, he squishes himself on Tommy, draping himself across him for a moment to grab one of Wilbur's many pillows. Tommy protests with a squawk, and pushes him off.

"I didn't know we were having a party," Techno remarks dryly.

"Neither did I," Wilbur returns in kind, "You weren't exactly invited."

"Hmm," Tech says, "I heard bad social skills and came running."

Wilbur snorts, and Tommy chucks a small pillow at Techno. Techno grabs it, adding it to the collection he's slowly gaining, piling each one on top of him. The beanbag that Techno had previously been sitting on is also on his lap, and he's slowly being buried by it along with the pillows.

Wilbur snorts at him.

"Tommy, grab the weighted blanket?" Wilbur suggests. Tommy leaps to his feet and grabs the brown blanket off of Wilbur's bed, heaving the heavyweight into his arms before dropping it onto Techno.

"We have these for a reason y'know," Tommy snarks.

Techno hums, unmoving and sinking further under the growing pile.

"I've become one with the pressure stim," he announces. He then looks critically at Tommy. "Tommy, how much do you weigh?"

"What?"

"Join the pile," Techno insists, "You're tiny, you won't squash me like Wilbur does."

"It's not my fault you're short!" Wilbur protests. And Techno's not small by any means, Wilbur's just a giant.

"I'm barely shorter than Wil!" Tommy complains. Techno ignores them both. With a huff, Tommy gets up once more, stands over Techno and his pile, before falling onto the cushions and blankets.

"Oof," Techno says, when he lands, before immediately sighs. "Yup. This 's good. Imma take a nap now."

"Techno, if you fuck up your sleep schedule anymore than it already is, Dad's gunna kill you."

"What Dad doesn't know won't hurt 'em," Techno replies. Wilbur scoffs and chucks another pillow his way. Techno snatches it, and adds it to the pile.

"Mine now," he declares, closing his eyes and humming again.

Things are going so well, Tommy's settled in, he's made his amends. Things are good.

And then he ruins it.

"Tommy?" Wilbur asks.

Tommy sniffles, swiping desperately at his eyes.

"What?" he challenges.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Wilbur asks.

"Nothing," Tommy snaps defensively. It's an immediate response, but it's also true in this case. "Nothing's wrong."

"Tommy you're literally crying," Techno points out.

"No I'm not."

"Oh okay then, your eyes must just be leaking then. Or allergies, huh?" Techno snarks.

"Fuck you," Tommy says, pushing off the pillows to stand once more, and storming out of Wilbur's room. He barely catches the site of Wilbur and Techno sharing confused looks after he leaves.

He takes a breath in, struggling as it hitches in his throat and he holds back a sob.

Not yet. Not yet.

It seems like forever, even though it's only a few feet, but Tommy gets to his room, and shuts the door behind him.

And that's when he screams.

He does it again, and then again, falling onto his bed and screaming into his pillow, loud sobs starting to rack through his body. He has no idea where this is coming from. He squeezes the stupid red and white striped pillow tight to his chest and heaves out gasping cries.

He doesn't hear the knock at his door at first, only noticing when Phil loudly calls its name.

"Tommy," he calls, "Tommy please answer me."

Tommy ignores him, still crying.

"Tommy, I'm going to open the door," Phil prefaces, "I need to make sure you're safe."

"Go away!" he shouts back.

"I'm opening the door," Phil warns, and Tommy barely hears it creak open over his sobbing.

“I’m going to sit down, right here at the door. I won’t come in, and I won’t block it if you want to leave,” Phil explains.

Tommy screams and grabs his pillow tighter. Where is this coming from?

“Fuck you!” he says, “Fuck you! Fuck this family.”

He grabs his other pillow and chucks it behind him, barely pausing to make sure it hits Phil.

It does. The action gives him an outlet, a pleasure he didn’t know he was craving, and he quickly chucks the other pillow at Phil as well. It also hits.

Phil says nothing, and sets both pillows to the side.

Tommy continues to cry, and realizes that without the pillow, he has nothing to grip onto. That makes him cry harder, and he balls his comforter up instead and clings to it.

He stays like that, heaving and sobbing through screams and racing tears. His mouth is dry and his nose is running and he doesn’t care because it hurts, it hurts so much and Tommy hates it.

This family, this family loves them and he hates them for it. Hates them.

Because Tommy’s bad. He’s a bad kid and he’s not supposed to be loved.

No one’s supposed to love him.

And yet, the three people in this house with him do. They love him.

And Tommy, Tommy loves them right back.

He screams, and cries and Phil waits at the door. When he’s finally done, covered in dried tears and snot along with a hoarse voice, he staggers out of bed and over to Phil, immediately collapsing into Phil’s arms.

“Yes,” he says, “Yes, I want to be adopted.”

Phil’s face immediately breaks into his characteristic smile. The sight of it has Tommy weeping harder as he buries his face into Phil’s shoulder. He nuzzles into him- with only a second of embarrassment- taking him in. Phil smells sweet, and slightly of ginger. He smells like home and- and he’s Tommy’s dad now.

He’s- Tommy, Tommy’s his son.

He has a family.

“That sounds amazing,” Phil smiles into his hair, “Do you wanna go tell your brothers?”

Brothers. Not foster brothers. Brothers. Tommy’s so fucking excited.

He nods, and leaps to his feet, almost whacking Phil in the chin with his head. Luckily, Phil seems to be prepared for his hyperactivity and quickly moves out of the way. Tommy races to grab his hands and drags him over to Wilbur's room.

Wilbur's door is still open, and both him and Techno are huddled close together, eyes narrow and faces pinched. Techno taps his hand on his knee harshly, and they both look up when Tommy peeks his head in.

Wilbur stands, Techno quickly following.

"Hi," Tommy says.

Phil takes his hand from Tommy's, placing it on his shoulder instead. Tommy leans into the contact.

"So... I'm kinda..." he trails off, grinning, not exactly sure how to say it. Phil gives his shoulder a small squeeze and Tommy looks at him.

"Can you?" he asks.

Phil smiles at him and nods.

"So, Tommy's going to be your new brother," he announces, "He asked to be adopted."

They both stare for a second and at the exact same moment, both Wilbur and Techno leap into action.

"Holy shit!" Wilbur shouts, racing forward.

Techno bounces on his toes, shakes out his hands and shakes his head, hum forming in his throat.

"Can I hug you?" Wilbur asks, chest almost brushing Tommy's.

Tommy grins, and leans forward. Wilbur immediately pulls him close before lifting him clean off his feet.

Tommy clings to him with a yelp and Wilbur spins him with a giddy laugh. Techno's hands flap even more furiously in the background.

Tommy's home.

The first person Tommy actually tells himself is Tubbo. He's warned Tubbo numerous times that he can't get too close to him because he'll inevitably end up getting kicked out at some point and Tommy saw how attached he got for the baby bird he helped nurture back to health, and that had only been a few days. The last thing Tommy wants to do is hurt the one friend he has.

But that had been a while ago, ever since a bit into therapy, he's started to realize that he has a permanent place here if he wants it. It just... took him a while to say yes and really accept

that. Tubbo gets that, Tommy thinks. They've talked about it a bit. But Tommy remembers telling him months ago that this won't be for long and...

And he calls Tubbo.

"Hey," he says, face lighting up as his friend answers, face cam quickly appearing.

"Tommy!" Tubbo says with a smile.

"I'm going to be sticking around for a while," he blurts out.

"Oh- okay?" Tubbo says and Tommy rolls his eyes. He loves Tubbo- he does- but he didn't get it.

"No like- I'm being adopted."

"Holy shit," Tubbo says, "Holy shit. Congrats! We have to get you a cake."

Tommy laughs, still grinning widely as he flaps a hand at his side gently and rocks slightly, two stims he's steadily picked up from Techno.

"Dude, I'm so happy for you," Tubbo says, "That's amazing."

Tommy nods furiously.

They spend another hour talking, both of them giddy on the exciting news. Tommy's so goddamn grateful to be where he is, to be here and to be happy, and getting adopted.

He knows it isn't instant, knows it'll take it while. Wilbur's adoption took seven months, Techno's took nearly three years. Tommy knows this isn't going to be a quick process, but he's okay with that.

Because time doesn't matter, he's not counting down days anymore, because there's no risk of him going anywhere. He's staying here, for today, tomorrow, and everyday after that until he chooses to leave.

And he will, eventually. Adulthood's a thing and he'll move on but he'll always be able to come back to Phil. Because he has a home, a home that's not just his, but his family's.

He spends the rest of the day, and then the next week in giddy excitement. It's nice to be happy, with no weight, no stress. It's relieving, not carrying a load he hadn't even noticed he'd been lugging around for years.

Or- it's almost relieving. There's still one thing that's niggling in the back of his head.

He's in Wil's room again, joined by his brothers. Somehow it's sorta become their communal meeting spot, and Tommy isn't complaining. He likes Wilbur's room. It smells like rain and something woody with a hint of vanilla. The scent is addictive.

He's only slightly distracted and he blurts out his words without quite realizing what he's going to say or who he's interrupting.

"Why'd you forgive me?" he asks.

Techno and Wilbur immediately turn to him, and the room falls silent.

Tommy fights the urge to shrivel in on himself.

"Elaborate?" Techno requests.

Tommy takes a breath, and speaks of his experiences. He works hard to choose his words carefully, to have a productive conversation that's not led with self-hatred as he's still prone to do.

"I guess- I hurt both of you. Badly. Techno, I intentionally triggered you and caused you to have a meltdown. Wilbur, I took your meds and made you go through withdrawal which could have had way more serious repercussions than it did.

"I get that I've made amends," Tommy goes on, "I understand I've done my best to apologize and prove that it won't happen again. But those are- those are things I've done, yeah?"

Wilbur looks like he's about to speak up, but Techno sends him a look and he nods instead.

"Right, so. Why did you forgive me? What- I'm not- This isn't like a pity thing," Tommy insists, "I know you do forgive me, I know that I've done my best to rectify my actions. I'm just- I'm trying to understand your actions."

"Tommy," Wilbur says- and gosh why does he look so sad, that's exactly what Tommy didn't want, "Of course we forgive you." His answer is immediate, and sweet, and reassuring. But it's not what Tommy's looking for.

"Wilbur, shut up," Techno says gruffly.

Wilbur gives him a look and goes to say more, but Techno beats him to it.

"I forgave you because I've been where you are," Techno says, "I get it. I do. I get the lashing out, self-sabotaging 'cause you think it's the only choice. Shit's not okay, obviously, but I understand where it stems from. Doesn't excuse actions, but it explains them. And it's a lot easier to forgive when there's an explanation that makes sense, an explanation I can relate to."

And that. That, okay Tommy can accept that. He gets that.

He turns to Wilbur, hoping for an actual response this time.

Wilbur takes a breath.

"It's- you didn't want to hurt us. It's like Techno said, I understand that place of self sabotage. I forgave you because if- when- I was in the same place as you I would want support and

guidance and forgiveness. So I want to give you what I wanted, what I needed.”

Tommy nods, and then nods more.

“Okay.”

“Yeah?” Wilbur asks.

Tommy looks up, holding Wilbur’s gaze. Techno keeps his eyes away, but Tommy knows he’s paying attention as well.

“Yeah,” Tommy says. And that’s that.

He cries himself to sleep that night. They’re good tears.

And so he stays and the school year ends and he spends the entire summer with this family and slowly starts to realize that things aren’t going to go wrong. That they will stay like this, that Tommy will stay and things will be okay.

Things are okay.

Summer ends and Tommy finds himself starting school again. Which fuck school, who even likes school? Okay well Techno likes school but he doesn’t count because he’s a nerd. Plus then his teacher decides that group projects in math class are apparently a great idea. And right at the beginning of the new school year. So kind.

He struggles with it at home, working in his room on his part, but Wil’s playing guitar and he can’t focus. Wil’s planning on staying here for the next year. Instead of university, he enrolled in community college. It’s something he’s interested in, a plan for his future where he doesn’t have to leave home quite so soon. Tommy’s happy for him.

But he’s also fucking distracting so Tommy heads downstairs to the kitchen table.

The change in scene doesn’t help much, because as he’s stabbing numbers into his calculator, he’s reminded of the first time he sat at this table, meeting everyone for the first time.

He’d been so sad then, and so scared. So full of hate and anger, largely directed towards himself. It’s a weight Tommy had carried with himself for years without noticing.

Techno comes into the room at one point- probably avoiding his own homework- and sliding into his seat at the table after grabbing a bowl and filling it with carrots.

“Whatcha working on?” he grumbles.

“Math project,” he sighs.

“That’s stupid.”

“Right?” Tommy huffs.

Techno watches him work for all of thirty seconds before pulling out his phone and sliding his headphones onto his ears, leg bouncing absentmindedly at his side.

“What’s your thoughts on a garden?” Techno asks.

“A garden?” Tommy asks. Techno nods, sliding his phone to Tommy and showing him some diagrams of the backyard.

“I’m thinking of convincing Phil to let us start one,” Techno says, “plant some plants and shit.”

“Why?”

“It’s better than math,” Techno points out.

Which is okay, fair enough, Tommy’s listening. He let’s Techno ramble as he walks him through the process of their hypothetical garden and what they would grow. Tommy finds himself strangely intrigued, and listens intently to Techno’s plans.

“Can we get a weed plant?” Tommy asks.

“Tommy you are a child,” Techno wheezes out between laughs.

“So?”

“You can’t- you don’t- Tommy no.”

“Is there a limit to how many weed plants you can have? Like is it a one per person thing or what?” Tommy asks, starting to type that exact question into his own phone.

“Tommy,” Techno continues to wheeze, “Tommy we’re not growing weed in our background. Phil would actually murder us.”

“Hey, you’re the one with the garden idea,” Tommy protests, “Don’t drag me into this.”

“Tommy you’re the one suggesting we buy weed plants!”

“And what are we discussing here?” Phil asks, raising an eyebrow at them as they both hide guilty gazes.

"Nothing," Tommy says.

At the same time Techno mutters, "No shut up. I'm not saying that."

"We're not growing weed in the background," Phil says, "sorry to disappoint."

"But Phil," Tommy whines, "I want one."

"Well your shit outta luck," Phil dismisses. Tommy gives a weak pout, not even trying too hard and Techno snorts at his side.

Phil refills his water bottle, hovering for a moment as Tommy takes a minute to make his case.

In all honesty, it's not something Tommy wants. Such as he jokes, he doesn't smoke and wouldn't have any use for it. But the meme factor is just too great.

"We're not getting a weed plant," Techno insists.

Phil looks over at him with a small smile and Tommy pouts at the loss of his partner.

"Right?" Techno asks, looking up at Phil.

Phil's face softens slightly, and Tommy scrunches his face at the odd interaction.

"Right," Phil confirms, "no weed plants."

"So you can fuck off and stop suggesting it," Techno insists harshly.

Tommy's heart pounds and he feels the beginning dread of panic flow through him. But it doesn't last long, because he takes in Techno's clenched hands, downturned gaze, and deep frown and realizes he's talking to himself, not Tommy.

"We're not getting a weed plant," Techno insists, "Phil said no. We don't want one. We don't need one. End of story."

"What about weed plants?" Wilbur asks, swinging into the room from the stairs.

"We're not talking about weed plants anymore," Phil says, kindly but firm. Wilbur takes the hint and nods.

"I thought we could start a garden?" Techno proposes, "It might be nice."

"Have I ever told you how much I fucking hate anteaters?" Wilbur responds.

Tommy bursts into laughter. It's the stupidest thing, this conversation and he loves that he's a part of it. It so... them, and Tommy is now a part of that family. It's gratifying.

"Wilbur, Tommy and me are the ones who are supposed to have adhd," Techno teases.

"They're awful creatures. Horrible. Have you seen a baby anteater? Disgusting. Have you seen their tongues? Freaks of nature."

"Wil," Phil begins to challenge, "you can't just-"

"They're awful animals. Horrible creatures," Wilbur insists, "no one can change my mind."

All Tommy can do is continue to laugh at the absurdity of it all. He sits back and watches the conversation progress, as Techno pushes for a garden and Wilbur pushes for the extermination of all anteaters on the planet earth.

Phil eventually says yes, but to which one Tommy's not actually sure.

When the conversation slowly starts to die down, all of them with goofy smiles on their faces, Phil speaks up.

"Tommy, can I steal you for a minute?"

Tommy jerks his head, the sharp fleeting note of panic spiking through him. But Phil's smiling, and he's relaxed. It's enough to calm Tommy, who relaxes his own body.

"Yeah, sure," he agrees. He scoots away from the table, abandoning his homework for good.

Phil gives an even bigger smile, and turns, leading Tommy down the hall to his office. He pushes open the door, and Tommy walks in.

It's been months now- close to a year but Tommy has still yet to spend much time here. He knows Wil does on occasion, softly practicing guitar when Phil's not too busy. Techno has also claimed the beanbag in the corner as one of his favorite reading spots.

Tommy's already been nervous about bothering Phil. He hopes one day he can be as casual as his siblings.

Phil goes behind his desk, taking something out from the drawer before walking back over to Tommy.

It's a file, and a small velvet bag.

Tommy frowns at it.

Phil hands the file over first.

Tommy takes it, opening it up and immediately realizes what it is.

"These- are these-"

"Your adoption papers," Phil confirms, "it went through."

"But... but that was so quick," Tommy exclaims. Phil gives a small nod.

"I'm surprised too," he admits, "it helped that I've done this twice before. Techno's case was a nightmare. And you didn't have any holds against you that would make it slow, so..."

Tommy stares at. Admittedly, He doesn't actually understand a lot of it, and the file has more in it as well, but he gets the gist. He knows what's important.

He's been adopted by Phil. Officially.

"Congratulations," Phil remarks.

"I- thank you," Tommy forces out, suddenly emotional. "Phil..."

"And," Phil says, "I have something small for you to go with it."

He hands over the bag, and Tommy takes it with trembling fingers. His mind goes back to a conversation he had with Techno months ago. This is his rose bush, he realizes, his photobook. This is his adoption gift, something special for him from Phil just like Wil and Techno got.

He opens it carefully and pulls out an antique, heavy compass.

He shifts it in his hands gently, studying the face of it and noticing how the arrow that should point north doesn't work. It turns with gravity, not listening to the electromagnetic field that travels around the earth.

Tommy shakes it gently, but it still spins lazily, incorrect.

He looks back up at Phil.

"That was my grandfather's compass," he says, "he used to take it out and show it to me. And he explained that it's magic. Y'know how?"

Tommy raises an eyebrow, already extremely unimpressed by the story, if touched by the sentiment.

"He said that this compass was magic, because it didn't just point north like any old compass, it would guide the user home."

Tommy looks back down at the object and the skewed arrow.

"It's a broken compass," he says flatly, "there's nothing magic about it."

Phil lets out a sharp laugh.

"Yeah, you're probably right, he agrees.

Tommy fiddles with it a bit more, and he watches the needle spin slightly, still not pointing north. It comes to a gentle stop in front of Phil.

Tommy knows it's coincidence, chance. He probably influenced it himself, unconsciously tipping it until it pointed right at him. Either way, he looks down at the family heirloom, because that's what this piece of junk is, and then back up at Phil.

With a cry, he takes a racing step forward, stumbling into Phil and pulling him into a bear hug, massive tears spilling out of his eyes and spilling down his cheeks. He couldn't be happier to have a piece of junk in his entire life. He's found his way home.

Chapter End Notes

If you've read this all the way through then I give you a firm nod of acknowledgement. I hope to see you in the sequel.

Speaking of the sequel, let's talk about that a bit:

- first chapter will be out in ~2 weeks
- a little more than a year has passed timeline wise
- Oreoboi will be a part of it
- Techno and Wilbur both no longer live at home

I really hope you're as hyped as I am. This is a series now, so subscribe to that to get the notif when it comes out.

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